

Colorado River Basin Climate and Hydrology

State of the Science

April 2020

Western Water Assessment

Chapter 7

Weather and Climate Forecasting



WESTERN WATER
ASSESSMENT
A NOAA RISA TEAM



University of Colorado **Boulder**

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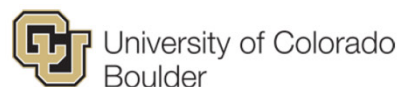
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An aerial photograph of a rugged mountain range. A prominent river, likely the Colorado River, winds through the valley. Several peaks are covered in snow, contrasting with the brown and tan hues of the surrounding terrain. The image is used as a background for the top half of the page.

Volume III

Short-term and Mid-term—Informing the 1-Month to 5-Year Time Horizon

Chapter 7. Weather and Climate Forecasting

Chapter 8. Streamflow Forecasting

Volume III of the Colorado River Basin State of the Science report focuses on models and methods for forecasting weather, climate, and streamflow at the short- to mid-term time scale. Forecasts at this time scale are critical to water managers ensuring supply to their customers, farmers making planting decisions, ski areas planning staffing needs, utility operators making purchasing decisions, and retailers trying to plan inventory, among many others.

The two chapters in Volume III offer comprehensive descriptions and assessments of the state of short-to-mid-term forecasting methods, their skill, the data they require, their applications, and their tradeoffs. Results from weather and climate forecasting models feed into streamflow forecasting models to generate forecasted inflows for Reclamation's three primary models.

Chapter 7 describes the methods used to forecast weather and climate. The chapter is organized around the three forecast time frames: weather, 1-14 days; sub-seasonal, 14 days to 3 months; and seasonal, 3 months to 1 year. Weather forecasts are the most skillful of the three, and demonstrate steady, if small, improvements. The most challenging of these time frames is the sub-seasonal time frame; this chapter describes why this is so, and addresses the constraints on future improvements to forecasts on this time frame. Seasonal forecasts perform in the middle—they currently lack skill, particularly for precipitation, but judicious use of these forecasts, at times and places of good predictability, could be beneficial. Accordingly, the bulk of the chapter provides background on the tools and techniques that are behind seasonal forecasts and provides a good reference on the operational seasonal forecast products. The chapter concludes by describing the implications of the current state of seasonal forecasting for the basin, particularly the Upper Basin, and describes

initiatives to improve seasonal forecasts. Finally, it surveys the challenges and opportunities for forecasting across all three time frames.

Chapter 8 describes the concepts, approaches and tools used to forecast streamflow. This chapter focuses mainly on techniques and models that are relevant to Reclamation operations and planning activities—the monthly to seasonal ensemble forecasts that provide critical input to Reclamation’s 24-Month Study (24MS) and Mid-term Operations Probabilistic Model (MTOM), which are used to generate system operations projections (monthly reservoir releases and storages) up to 5 years out (Chapter 3). The chapter explains the sources of predictability, in order to provide a basis for forming priorities for improvement of forecasts. It describes three types of forecast models, dynamical, statistical, and hybrid; two types of forecasts, single-value and ensemble; and two forecasting paradigms, in-the-loop and over-the-loop. It provides detailed descriptions of operational forecast systems and experimental products across three time frames: short-range (days), mid-range (months) and interannual to decadal (Year 2 and beyond). Then, the use of mid-range streamflow forecasts—the only operational use of streamflow forecasts by Reclamation in the basin—in the 24MS and MTOM is described. Reclamation has considerable immediate interest in improving operational forecasts for Year 2, but decadal climate prediction currently exhibits poor skill, and NWS has not yet made investments toward improving Year 2 predictions. Chapter 8 describes Reclamation’s own initiative toward improved Year 2 forecasts, the Colorado River Basin Streamflow Forecast Testbed, intended to provide an objective approach to compare current and experimental streamflow forecasting methods. Finally, Chapter 8 provides a comprehensive review of the benefits, limitations, and challenges of a broad array of potential scientific and technological improvements to the existing operational streamflow forecast systems.



Chapter 7

Weather and Climate Forecasting

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Key points

- Uncertainty about upcoming weather and climate conditions translates into a major source of uncertainty in seasonal streamflow forecasts.
- Weather forecasts out to 10 days have relatively high skill and are progressively improving; they are incorporated into the CBRFC's operational streamflow forecasts.
- Sub-seasonal (2 weeks to 12 weeks) and seasonal (3 months to 1 year+) climate forecasts have much lower skill, especially in the Upper Basin, and they are not incorporated in the CBRFC streamflow forecasts.
- A major research effort has ramped up in the last decade to advance sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasting.
- Sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasts for temperature are generally more skillful than forecasts for precipitation, and skill for both is generally higher for the Lower Basin than for the Upper Basin.
- For precipitation, the Climate Prediction Center's seasonal forecast skill in both basins has been positive for winter and spring, suggesting users should focus their forecast use on those seasons.
- There are other opportunities to better utilize the skill that does exist in sub-seasonal and seasonal climate forecasts, such as using them to “nudge” the streamflow forecast ensemble during post-processing.

7.1 Overview

Uncertainty about future weather and climate affects streamflow forecasting on multiple timescales. In particular, uncertainty about the future weather and climate is one of the largest sources of error in seasonal streamflow forecasting. Even if, on April 1, we had perfect knowledge of the snowpack, and knew exactly how much of that snow would be translated into runoff, we would still have considerable uncertainty in spring-summer streamflow forecasts, because the weather that occurs from April through July can have a substantial impact on the runoff over that period.

When weather and climate forecasts have positive skill, i.e., predictive value above and beyond a null forecast (i.e., the climatological average conditions), there is an opportunity to inform and improve streamflow forecasts, and to guide other water resource decision-making. Weather forecasts out to roughly 10 days have relatively high skill for both temperature and precipitation (Figure 7.1), so CBRFC operational water supply forecasts incorporate them, as described in section 7.3.

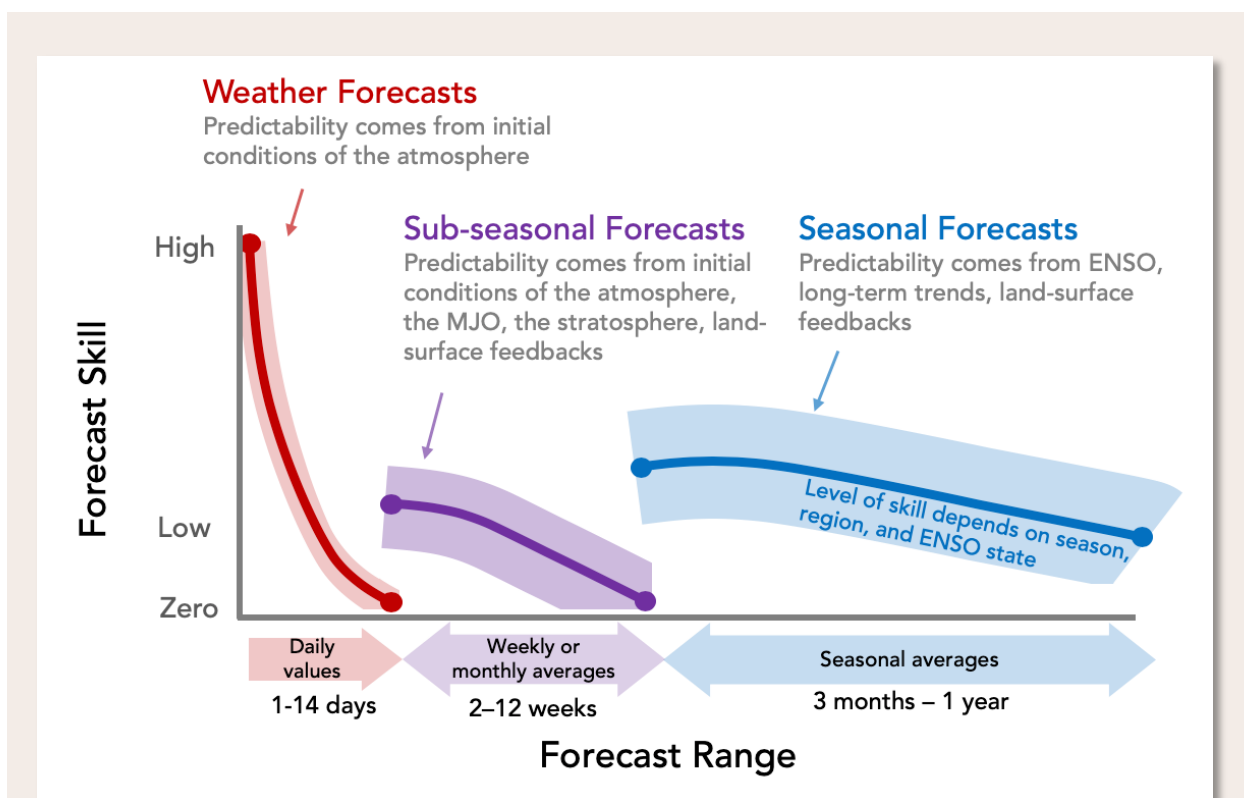


Figure 7.1

Schematic showing typical forecast skill relative to forecast range for three types of weather and climate forecasts: short-range weather forecasts; sub-seasonal climate forecasts, and seasonal climate forecasts, including potential sources of predictability. Relative skill is based on differing forecast averaging periods, shown inside the arrows. (Source: adapted from a figure by Elisabeth Gawthrop and Tony Barnston, International Research Institute for Climate and Society).

At longer sub-seasonal and seasonal climate forecast periods (>14 days), the forecast is generally much lower than the skill for weather forecasts, constraining opportunities for improving streamflow forecasts (Figure 7.1). The CBRFC operational water supply forecasts do not currently incorporate sub-seasonal (2–12 weeks) or seasonal (3 months and longer) climate forecasts, due to their low skill.

The CBRFC's Hydrologic Ensemble Forecast Service (HEFS) system provides a pathway for incorporating additional weather and climate forecasts into their streamflow forecasts, if they have sufficient and consistent skill and an archive of historical hindcasts to allow validation. CBRFC forecasters have tested the incorporation of some sub-seasonal and seasonal climate forecasts, as described below and in Chapter 8.

The overall gap in predictive skill between weather forecasts and longer-term climate forecasts is reflected in fundamental differences in the way the forecasts are presented. First, weather forecasts are for specific daily

(or more frequent) outcomes, while sub-seasonal and seasonal climate forecasts are for outcomes as averaged across weekly, biweekly, monthly, or seasonal periods. Second, weather forecasts are usually presented as *deterministic* forecasts: a single temperature value or precipitation amount is forecasted. (The exception is the familiar “probability of precipitation” forecast, e.g., 40% chance of rain tomorrow.) Sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasts are typically presented in *probabilistic* terms, as a shift in likelihood compared to the historical distribution of outcomes, e.g., 60% chance of wetter than normal conditions over the winter season, compared to a 50% chance across the historical period (assuming a 2-category forecast). Sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasts can also be presented as deterministic forecasts (e.g., 2.3” of precipitation over the next 1-month period) but users should be aware that the specificity and precision of such forecasts is far greater than their accuracy and skill.

Increasingly, “S2S” is used as a shorthand for “sub-seasonal to seasonal forecasts,” but the actual forecast periods being referred to can be inconsistent. In most technical literature, S2S refers to sub-seasonal forecasts; i.e., forecast periods up to one season (<3 months). But S2S has also been used to refer to sub-seasonal *and* seasonal forecasts, or, less frequently, sub-seasonal *and* season 1 (i.e., 3-month) forecasts. To avoid confusion, in this chapter we use the terms “sub-seasonal” and “seasonal” instead of S2S, except when the latter is part of the name of a project.

7.2 What makes a weather or climate forecast useful?

First, a distinction needs to be made between forecast *quality*, which is assessed independently of the use of the forecast, and forecast *value*, which is the utility of the forecast to the user.

The assessment of forecast quality—verification—has several components. The measures of quality need to be evaluated across many (100s or 1000s) forecasts produced by the same forecast *system* in order for the measures to be taken as indicative of the quality of current or forthcoming forecasts that have not yet been verified (Hudson 2017), which is what the user really wants to know.

- *Accuracy* is the overall level of agreement between the forecasted and predicted values. But accuracy by itself can be misleading, since a “naïve” forecast can be quite accurate. For example, since precipitation occurs on only 20–30% of all days in most locations in the Upper Basin, a consistent daily forecast of “no precipitation” will be accurate 70–80% of the time.
- *Skill* is more meaningful than accuracy; it measures the accuracy of the forecast relative to a baseline “naïve” forecast: the climatological value,

a simple persistence forecast, or, if there are multiple forecast “bins,” the odds of forecasting the correct bin by chance alone. Positive skill (>0 for nearly all skill metrics) means that there is value beyond the naïve forecast. There are many different metrics of forecast skill; the metrics shown in the figures and tables below, and explained in the text, are the anomaly correlation (AC) and Heidke skill score (HSS). Both are fairly simplistic and cannot by themselves convey the multiple dimensions of forecast quality, or the forecast’s value to the user.

- *Reliability* is a measure of forecast quality specific to probabilistic forecasts; it is the agreement between the forecast probability and observed frequency of outcomes. For example, across all of the days a weather forecast system called for a 30% chance of rain, for perfect reliability it would have rained on 30% of those days, and so on for other percentages. Reliability can likewise be measured for sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasts; e.g., across all the 3-month seasons for which a climate forecast system called for a 60% chance of above-normal precipitation (assuming only two categories, above and below), then for perfect reliability, 60% of those seasons should have observed above-average precipitation, and so on.
- Additional measures of skill specific to probabilistic forecasts complement reliability. *Resolution* measures how well the forecasts can distinguish different categories; e.g., do the observed outcomes differ between periods with forecasts of 60% chance of above-normal precipitation and with forecasts of 70% chance of above-normal precipitation. *Sharpness* is the ability to forecast extreme values (probabilities near 0% or 100%) in at least some cases, rather than only values clustered around the observed mean probability.

Broadly speaking, the higher the forecast quality, the more opportunity there is for the forecast to be useful, but forecast quality and value to the user are not necessarily linked (Hudson 2017). Usefulness also strongly depends on the decision context, including the risk tolerance of the user, and whether the forecast is used in a decision-support tool (e.g., a streamflow forecast model) or considered on its own.

Deterministic weather forecasts out to 5–10 days have become skillful enough that the forecasted conditions can be treated as though they *will* occur, such as with the incorporation of weather forecasts into the CBRFC ESP water supply forecasts (see section 7.3). Water managers often use weather forecasts to make discrete, yes-or-no decisions with some confidence, e.g., releasing water from a nearly full reservoir now to avoid an uncontrolled spill a week from now, given the forecast of heavy rainfall over the next five days.

Sub-seasonal and seasonal climate forecasts will never have that level of skill or certainty; relatively low predictability at these time scales may be a fundamental property of the climate system (Albers and Newman 2019). But if climate forecasts have at least some positive skill or reliability for the basin and season of interest, they can potentially be useful. Since climate forecasts are typically presented in probabilistic terms, they are suited for modeling and decision support frameworks that are themselves probabilistic, such as ensemble streamflow prediction. In this case, the tendency shown in the climate forecast, if any (e.g., 60% chance of above-normal precipitation), can be used to weight the historical years used to populate the streamflow ensemble.

Climate forecasts can also be used to inform discrete, infrequent yes-or-no decisions, such as whether to generate hydropower during the fall and winter instead of maximizing water storage, but decision makers must accept the significant risk of the forecasted climate tendency not actually occurring (Garbrecht and Piechota 2005). Also, there may not be a large enough forecasted tendency in a given year or season to influence a decision. In many contexts, then, climate forecasts may provide more value when used selectively, rather than routinely.

7.3 Weather forecasts (1 to 14 days out)

The steady progress in weather forecasting over the last several decades has been called a “quiet revolution,” resulting from a steady accumulation of knowledge about the atmosphere and technical advances in modeling. Forecast skill for the mid-latitude regions in the Northern Hemisphere, such as over the Colorado River Basin, has been increasing by about 1 day per decade for forecast lead times of 3 to 10 days; today’s 5-day weather forecast is as skillful as the 4-day forecast was 10 years ago (Bauer, Thorpe, and Brunet 2015).

The main source of predictability and skill for weather forecasts is the accurate description of the initial conditions of the atmosphere (Figure 7.1) by coordinated global networks of observations from sensors that are land, ocean, and satellite-based, and from airborne sensors. Once initialized with those observations, the weather forecast model simulates the evolution of the initial synoptic (large scale) weather patterns shown in the observations. The skill of weather forecasts, on average, systematically declines from day 1 to day 14 (Figure 7.1) as the information contained in the initial conditions is gradually lost to chaotic processes underlying the motions of the atmosphere. This information loss can be slowed by improved initialization of the models (i.e., better observations), and by improved modeling of the physical processes, but a marked drop-off in skill during weeks 1 and 2 will persist through any conceivable future improvements. Producing moderately skillful forecasts at longer lead times

(i.e., sub-seasonal) requires additional information beyond weather patterns and associated atmospheric motions, such as the correct prediction of changes in the stratosphere, persistence due to land surface conditions, and slowly varying ocean-atmosphere patterns (e.g., Madden-Julian Oscillation, or MJO; and El Niño-Southern Oscillation, or ENSO).

All operational weather forecasts are based on dynamical, physics-based simulation models that run on supercomputers; thus, weather forecasting is also referred to as numerical weather prediction (NWP). The domain of most weather models is global, though very-high-resolution weather models (e.g., Weather Research and Forecasting model, WRF), with regional domains such as the western U.S., are also used for short-term forecasts of 48 hours or less.

The domain of all weather and climate models is gridded in three dimensions, with the vertical dimension representing multiple layers of the atmosphere. The models solve the fundamental physical equations for fluid motion; conservation of mass, momentum, and energy; and the ideal gas law. Many relevant processes occur at scales smaller than the model grid, such as cumulus cloud formation, so parameterization schemes are needed to properly describe the impact of these sub-grid-scale mechanisms on the large-scale flow of the atmosphere (Bauer, Thorpe, and Brunet 2015). The initialization of the forecasts with observations is accomplished through data assimilation, which typically involves the statistical correction of a prior short-term gridded model forecast to the newly available observations, in order to provide the most accurate gridded depiction of the initial state.

The primary global weather forecast models used in operational weather forecasts in the U.S. include the NOAA National Centers for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) Global Forecast System (GFS) model, the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) Integrated Forecast System (IFS) model (often referred to as the “European model”), and the Global Environmental Multiscale (GEM) model (the “Canadian model”).

The evolution of weather patterns over time is highly sensitive to the initial state of the atmosphere, and we cannot observe and describe those initial conditions perfectly. Consequently, it has become common to run a set, or ensemble, of weather predictions from the same model using slightly different initial conditions. The spread of the forecasts in the ensemble thus captures the uncertainty due to our imperfect knowledge of initial conditions. The NOAA Global Ensemble Forecast System (GEFS) based on the NOAA GFS forecast model is made up of 21 separate forecasts (ensemble members), with output four times a day and forecasts going out to 16 days. The ECMWF Ensemble Prediction System comprises 51 forecasts

from the ECMWF forecast model using different initial conditions, like GEFS, and also with slightly different model equations to represent uncertainty due to model structure and parameters (see discussion of uncertainty in Chapter 1).

Even with recent technical progress, these ensemble prediction systems for weather (and climate) forecasts inevitably have some bias (the forecasted mean is different from the observed mean) and unreliability (the forecasted distribution is different from the observed distribution). Thus, statistical post-processing of “raw” forecasts, to improve ensemble forecast guidance prior to its dissemination, is a critical element of the forecast process. The discrepancies between past forecasts and observations are used to adjust the raw real-time forecasts.

Skill of forecasts over weather timescales

Table 7.1 shows the skill of weeks 1 and 2 forecasts of precipitation and temperature for the Upper and Lower Basins from the NOAA NCEP CFSv2 (Climate Forecast System) model. The skill metric (Anomaly Correlation Coefficient; ACC) compares the 14-day average forecasted precipitation and temperature with the observed 14-day averages. As noted earlier, and shown in Figure 7.1, the skill drops off rapidly within that 14-day period, and the skill would be substantially higher if the results were only for week 1.

Table 7.1

Skill (Anomaly Correlation; AC) for weeks 1–2 (1–14 days out) of deterministic forecasts from the CFSv2 model for the calendar year (annual) and the climatological seasons, based on reforecasts for the 1999–2010 period. A perfect forecast would have an AC skill of 1.0; the climatological average has a skill of 0. The skill scores for the eight HUC4 sub-basins each in the Upper Basin and Lower Basin were averaged to produce the scores shown here. The CFSv2 forecasts were bias-corrected using quantile mapping. (Data: S2S Outlooks for Watersheds; <http://hydro.rap.ucar.edu/s2s/>)

Skill (AC) for Weeks 1-2 forecasts, CFSv2 model						
Variable	Basin	Annual	DJF	MAM	JJA	SON
Precipitation	Upper Basin	0.59	0.70	0.56	0.51	0.57
	Lower Basin	0.67	0.77	0.59	0.58	0.58
Temperature	Upper Basin	0.77	0.74	0.78	0.77	0.79
	Lower Basin	0.80	0.79	0.81	0.74	0.80

The forecast skill is generally high (about 0.6–0.8), with overall higher skill for temperature forecasts than precipitation forecasts. This disparity in forecast skill between temperature and precipitation is seen across longer time scales as well, which reflects that temperature varies less than precipitation over both time and space, and is also more straightforward to simulate and predict. Table 7.1 also shows that Lower Basin precipitation forecasts are somewhat more skillful than those for the Upper Basin, and that precipitation forecast skill in both basins is higher in winter than in other seasons. Predictive skill for precipitation also has strong seasonal patterns; skill is highest in winter, reflecting that the primary mechanism of precipitation (mid-latitude cyclonic storms) is broader scale and better simulated than convective precipitation in the warmer seasons.

CFSv2 is a fully coupled climate forecast model that incorporates the GFS weather forecast model (run at lower resolution than for weather forecasting) to represent atmospheric motions, an ocean model, and the Noah land surface model (Chapter 6). We show the skill of CFSv2 for weather timescales (weeks 1–2), instead of that of the GFS or another dedicated weather forecast model, to allow direct comparison with the skill (i.e., ACC) of the same CFSv2 model over sub-seasonal timescales (weeks 3–4) later in this chapter (Table 7.2). The skill of the operational GFS model over this time period would be higher than CFSv2 due to its higher spatial resolution and more optimized capture of initial conditions.

As mentioned above, the skill of weather forecasts has been increasing at a fairly constant rate over the past 20 years, as many improvements have been made in observing systems, assimilation schemes, and the models themselves. There may be an opportunity for CBRFC streamflow forecasts to incorporate weather forecasts, especially for precipitation, at longer lead times than is currently done.

Current use of weather forecasts by the CBRFC

Currently, the CBRFC ESP water supply forecasts that are key inputs to the 24MS and MTOM models (Chapter 3) use two types of weather forecasts: the 10-day quantitative temperature forecast (QTF) and the 5-day quantitative precipitation forecast (QPF). The temperature forecasts come from the National Blend of Models (NBM), a nationally consistent suite of calibrated forecast guidance based on a blend of both NOAA and non-NOAA weather model data. The precipitation forecasts are based on the NBM and additional guidance from the NOAA Weather Prediction Center. The forecast grids are modified by the CBRFC to allow for their incorporation into the CBRFC streamflow forecast model (Chapters 6 & 8).

The QPF predicts a specific, most-probable amount of precipitation that will fall over the forecast period; i.e., it is presented as a deterministic forecast. Because these short-term forecasts of precipitation have high

skill, the CBRFC forecast model treats the QPF as though it represents precipitation that has already fallen. When a storm is forecasted to hit the basin within 1–5 days from the issuance of an ESP or official streamflow forecast, the forecasted storm as shown in the QPF will cause an increase in the forecasted seasonal streamflow volume, even though the storm has not yet arrived. Likewise, if the QTF shows an unusually warm period in mid-winter, the CBRFC model can reduce the modeled lower-elevation snowpack and thus decrease the forecasted streamflow volume. Thus, over the course of a season, a trace created by the most-probable ESP forecasts incorporating the QPF (and QTF) consistently leads, by up to 5 days, a trace created by ESP forecasts without the QPF, while having similar fluctuations reflecting storms and melt episodes (Figure 7.2).

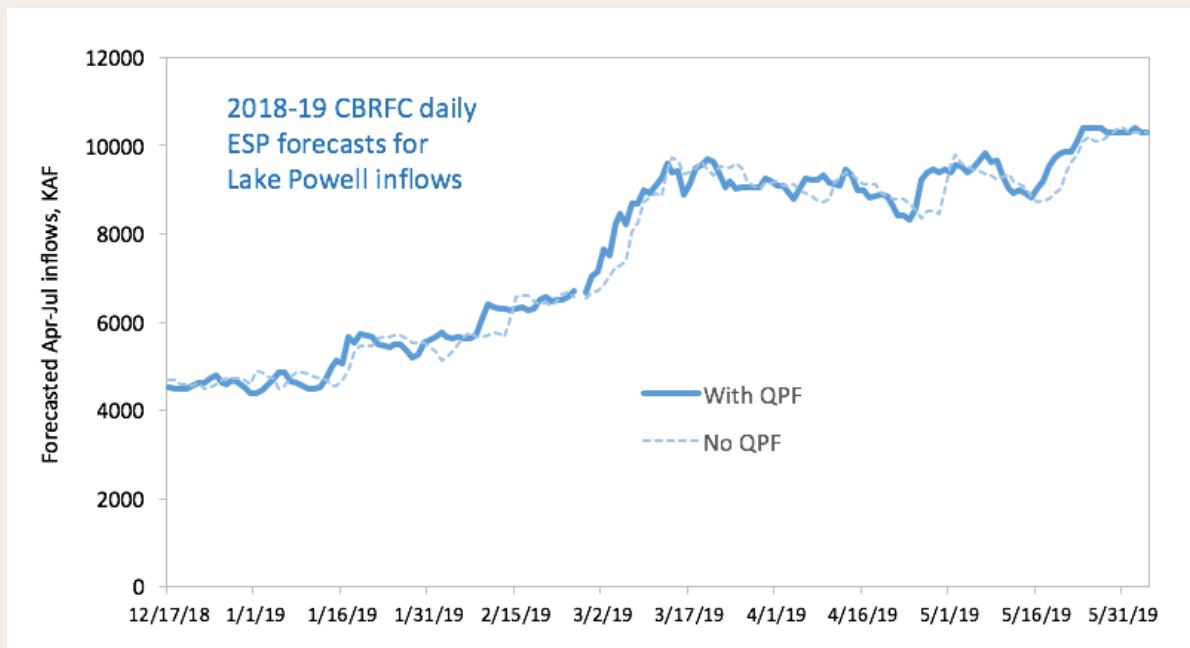


Figure 7.2

CBRFC daily ESP forecasts for April–July Lake Powell inflows for the 2018–2019 season issued from mid-December through early June. The default forecasts (“With QPF”) that incorporate 5-day Quantitative Precipitation Forecasts (QPF) and 10-day Quantitative Temperature Forecasts (QTF) show increases in forecasted streamflow volumes about 2–5 days before forecasts with no QPF, reflecting the expected gains from forecasted storms that have not yet occurred. (Data: CBRFC)

7.4 Sub-seasonal forecasts (2 weeks to 12 weeks)

Overview

For the purposes of this section, “sub-seasonal” refers to forecasts of meteorological variables at lead times from 2 weeks to 12 weeks in the future. This period has been called the “weather-climate prediction gap” (Mariotti, Ruti, and Rixen 2018). Short-term weather forecasts depend crucially on the initial state of the atmosphere that is input to the forecast models, while longer-term seasonal climate forecasts leverage predictability that emerges from the slower-evolving components of the Earth system including the ocean state, soil moisture, sea-ice conditions and other so-called “boundary conditions” for the atmosphere (Figure 7.1). The sub-seasonal prediction gap—where both initial and boundary conditions can be important—is being closed, albeit slowly, from both sides. The first two months of seasonal climate forecasts provides information about this time frame, while medium-range weather prediction models such as NOAA’s GFS and the ECMWF’s IFS are being extended out to 30–45 day forecasts and beyond.

The dynamical models used for sub-seasonal (and seasonal) predictions are typically run at lower resolution than for weather forecasts. They simulate the interactions between the atmosphere, ocean, land surface, and sometimes sea ice components of the climate system. While it is common to differentiate “climate models” from “weather models,” these two categories overlap a great deal, especially for the models used at a sub-seasonal time scale—some of which are also used for weather forecasts, while others are also used for multi-decadal climate projections (i.e., GCMs; Chapter 11).

When current generation weather forecast models (e.g., GFS, ECMWF IFS) are extended beyond 14 days, they develop large systematic forecast errors, particularly in their representation of tropical convection and the positioning of the mid-latitude jet stream and storm track (World Meteorological Organization 2013). Similarly, climate forecast models such as NOAA’s CFSv2, which are better tuned to reduce bias in the climatological (long-term average) atmospheric circulation, tend to have lower performance for short lead times (0–7 days) than the weather models. This lower performance is due to many factors: coarser spatial resolution, biases that appear in the oceanic and land surface components, and the fact that the atmospheric and oceanic initial conditions are not optimized as they are for weather models. An active area of research is to better incorporate data from the atmosphere, land, ice, and oceans into the initial conditions of forecast models, referred to as “coupled data assimilation” (World Meteorological Organization 2017).

Sub-seasonal forecasting also faces a statistical disadvantage compared to seasonal forecasts. Because the forecast periods for the sub-seasonal forecasts are shorter than the 3-month season that is the typical period for seasonal forecasts, there is less time for the unpredictable component of the climate (“noise”) to be averaged out.

Note, also, that sub-seasonal forecast skill quoted for periods such as “weeks 1–2” or “weeks 2–3” will be dominated by the weather forecast skill for the early part of that period (Figure 7.1). The same is true for the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) revised monthly forecasts that are issued with no lead time, i.e., on the last day of the month preceding the forecasted month, as opposed to the initial forecasts issued with 8–14 days lead time (See “NOAA CPC Outlooks” below).

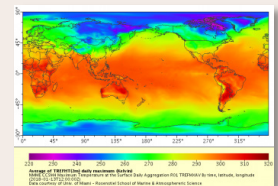
Sub-seasonal forecasts of temperature and precipitation are inherently suited for probabilistic interpretation and analysis. Accordingly, ensembles of numerical weather and climate prediction model forecasts are the tools of choice. Such ensembles may be generated by multiple runs of a single forecast model, which accounts for the uncertainty due to our imperfect knowledge of the initial state of the atmosphere. Ensembles can also be comprised of multiple runs from different models, such as with the North American Multi-Model Ensemble (NMME); in this case the ensemble also captures the uncertainty due to model structure and parameters, similar to the CMIP (Coupled Model Intercomparison Project) ensembles of multi-decadal climate projections (Chapter 11). The NMME, which is used for both operational sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasting consists of seven models in total: CFSv2, two Canadian models (CanCM4 and GEM-NEMO), two NOAA GFDL models (CM2.1 and FLOR), NCAR’s CCSM4, and NASA’s GEOS S2S. Studies have shown that the ensemble-average forecasts from NMME are more skillful than those from any single model in the ensemble (Becker, Van den Dool, and Zhang 2014; Kirtman et al. 2014).

An effort to generate and archive real-time and retrospective ensembles of sub-seasonal forecasts (SubX; Pegion et al. 2019), similar to NMME, is described below under “Other activities to improve sub-seasonal forecasts.”

Sources of predictability

The past decade has seen much progress in identifying and quantifying potential sources of sub-seasonal prediction skill (Vigaud, Robertson, and Tippett 2017), fueling a broad and active research program on sub-seasonal forecasting (e.g., National Academies 2016; World Meteorological Organization 2013). For the continental U.S., the potential sources of skill with the most promise are the tropical Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) (Stan et al. 2017), stratospheric variability, and land-atmosphere coupling, including the role of soil moisture. The identification of these phenomena is

NMME Models and Variables Summary



Link:

<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/data-access/model-data/model-datasets/north-american-multi-model-ensemble>

important because improvement in their representation in climate models can lead to improvement of sub-seasonal temperature and precipitation forecasts. A technical overview of the current state of the science is found in the volume edited by Robertson and Vitart (2019).

The MJO is a large area of enhanced convection (i.e., thunderstorms) in the tropical Indian and Pacific Ocean that generally moves from west to east (Zhang 2013 and references therein) and recurs with an irregular 40–70 day time period. Numerical models have limited success at forecasting the progression of convection associated with the MJO. Some of the strongest associations of the MJO with precipitation in the United States are seen in California and along the west coast of the U.S. during the wintertime (Zhou et al. 2012), including an effect on atmospheric rivers (Guan et al. 2012). While the impacts of the MJO in the interior West are less than those on the West Coast, the storms of early March 2019 demonstrated that atmospheric rivers can bring substantial precipitation to the Colorado River Basin.

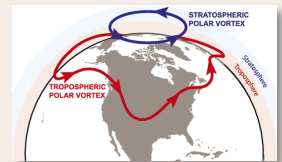
Certain stratospheric phenomena have also been identified as a potential source of skill for weather forecasting on sub-seasonal scales (Robertson and Vitart 2019). The stratosphere is the layer of the atmosphere that lies above the troposphere and is very stable, that is, resistant to vertical motions such as convection. In the mid-latitudes, the lower boundary of the stratosphere lies at about 10 km above the surface, but this boundary can be as high as 20 km in the tropics and as low as 7 km in the polar winter. There are two stratospheric phenomena of particular interest for sub-seasonal prediction: the quasi-biennial oscillation (QBO) in the tropics, where the winds above the tropical tropopause change direction in a roughly 26-month repeating cycle, and variations in the stratospheric polar vortex, including stratospheric sudden warming (SSW) events. See Waugh, Sobel, and Polvani (2017) for a primer on the “polar vortex.”

It is hypothesized that the changing winds due to the QBO may modulate the ability of tropical convection to influence the mid-latitude storm track and hence precipitation over the western U.S. For example, there is some indication that the QBO along with the MJO (see above) may jointly provide increased skill in predicting atmospheric river activity (Mundhenk et al. 2018). For the polar SSWs, the influence is more directly felt on the northern edge of the storm tracks and there is empirical evidence that in the days and weeks after a SSW there is a greater likelihood of extreme cold events (Kidston et al. 2015). However, the surface influence of the SSW appears to be primarily focused in Eurasia and the eastern United States, not in the Colorado River Basin.

A better representation of the land surface and its interactions with the atmosphere is another potential source of forecast improvement on

What is the Polar Vortex and How Does it Influence Weather?

Waugh, Sobel, and Polvani (2017)



Link:

<https://journals.ametsoc.org/doi/10.1175/BAMS-D-15-00212.1>

sub-seasonal time scales, and one particularly relevant to the Colorado River Basin. Most attention here is focused on the role of soil moisture—both better estimation of the initial state of the soils, and better simulation of the evolution of soil moisture anomalies. For sub-seasonal forecasts, soil moisture has two primary effects: It can reduce surface temperature by directing more of the incoming solar energy to evaporation rather than heating, and it can serve as a source of moisture to the atmosphere (Koster et al. 2011; Dirmeyer and Halder 2016). The research has tended to focus on summer conditions as that is when the impacts of soil moisture are thought to be greatest. Indeed, the impacts of having accurate soil moisture conditions were shown to be primarily for temperature.

In the Colorado River Basin and arid West, including initial soil-moisture states in the forecast model enhanced sub-seasonal temperature forecast skill, particularly when soils were wetter than average (Koster et al. 2011). For precipitation, increased forecast skill by including soil-moisture states was seen in the upper Great Plains, but not elsewhere. Correlations also have been found between soil moisture and the onset of the North American Monsoon; the hypothesized mechanism is that wet soils delay the seasonal heating of the land surface which is necessary to drive the land-ocean temperature gradient that then initiates the monsoon (Grantz et al. 2007). Accordingly, better treatment of soil moisture in forecast models may benefit summer precipitation forecasts in the Lower Basin. Simulation of the snowpack in forecast models could also result in improved sub-seasonal to seasonal forecasts both due to the direct effect of snow on surface temperature, and to the delayed impact on soil moisture during and after the snowmelt season.

Finally, ENSO's influence is present on the sub-seasonal time scale, as well as on longer time scales (see Chapter 2). Convection in the tropical Indian and Pacific Oceans has a significant influence on precipitation and temperature in the western United States. Ocean temperature anomalies associated with ENSO also lead to tropical convection anomalies that in turn alter the position and activity of the storm track in the Pacific. While ENSO is usually associated with seasonal forecasts (see next section), it also influences the likelihood of temperature and precipitation anomalies on sub-seasonal scales. As detailed in Chapter 2, those influences are stronger in the Lower Basin than the Upper Basin.

Operational sub-seasonal forecast products

NOAA CPC outlooks

There are relatively few operational forecasts from NOAA in the sub-seasonal time frame, reflecting the less mature state of sub-seasonal climate forecasting relative to weather forecasting, and even relative to seasonal climate forecasting. They are described here. First, NOAA CPC

produces an operational, 2-category (above or below normal), probabilistic temperature outlook for weeks 3–4 (Figure 7.3, left). The outlook is based on a blend of dynamical forecast model output, including CFSv2, ECMWF, and the SubX model ensemble, as well as the statistical (or empirical) tools also used for the CPC seasonal outlooks (Table 7.3). Reforecasts may also be used to adjust model output.

The quantity shown in these maps (Figure 7.3) is interpreted as the probability of the average temperature for days 15–30 being above or below the 1981–2010 observed average for that two-week period. For locations where it is impossible to assign any odds, “EC” or “equal chances” is indicated. In contrast, the 6–10 day and 8–14 day outlooks, as well as the seasonal outlooks, are 3-category, tercile forecasts (above normal, near normal, and below normal). NOAA CPC also produces a two-category precipitation outlook for weeks 3–4 (Figure 7.3, right), but this outlook is labeled “experimental” because little skill has yet been demonstrated.

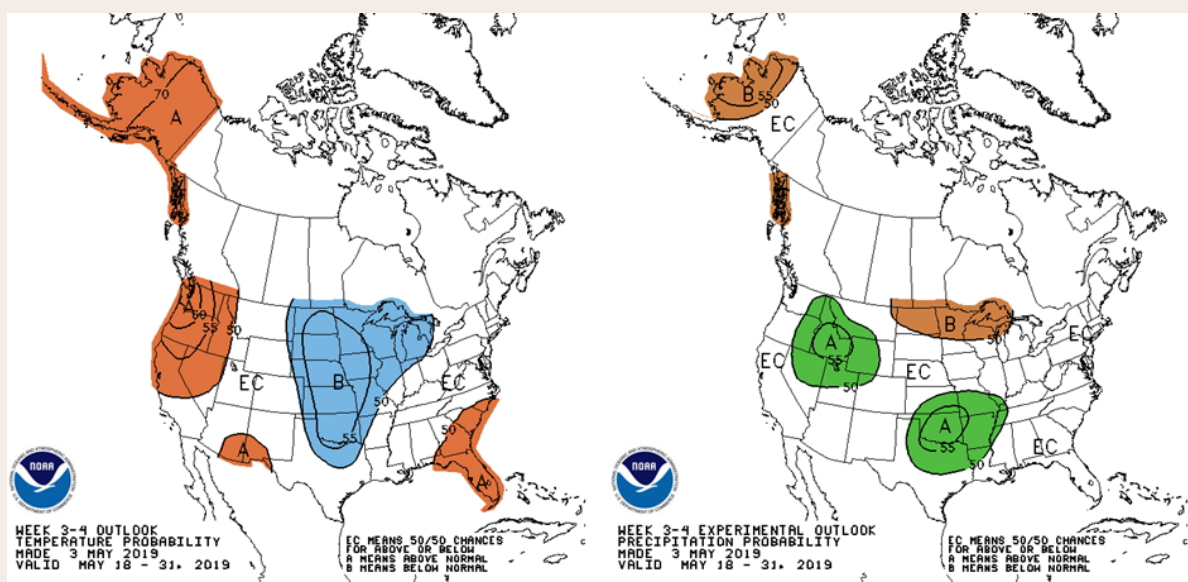


Figure 7.3

NOAA CPC operational 2-category (above or below normal) probabilistic temperature outlook for weeks 3–4 (left) and experimental 2-category (above or below normal) probabilistic precipitation outlook for weeks 3–4 (right). (Source: NOAA CPC; <https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/NMME/>)

NOAA CPC also produces operational 30-day temperature and precipitation outlooks (Figure 7.4), likewise based on a blend of dynamical forecast models (NMME ensemble—see next section; CFSv2 and ECMWF) and statistical tools and trends. These are issued mid-month, with a “valid” period starting at the beginning of the next month (0.5 month lead). With

that 2-week lead time, weather forecast skill is not included in the outlooks. Updated 30-day outlooks are issued at the end of the month (0-month lead), which do incorporate weather forecast information for weeks 1-2, though updated NMME information is not available.

Finally, a 90-day (3-month) average seasonal forecast is also made (as discussed in more detail in the next section), with a 2-week lead time (0.5 month lead). For each of these forecast periods, CPC provides a discussion of the reasoning behind each forecast, including factors such as the MJO and soil moisture, as well as a discussion of the guidance from dynamical models, including those archived in SubX.

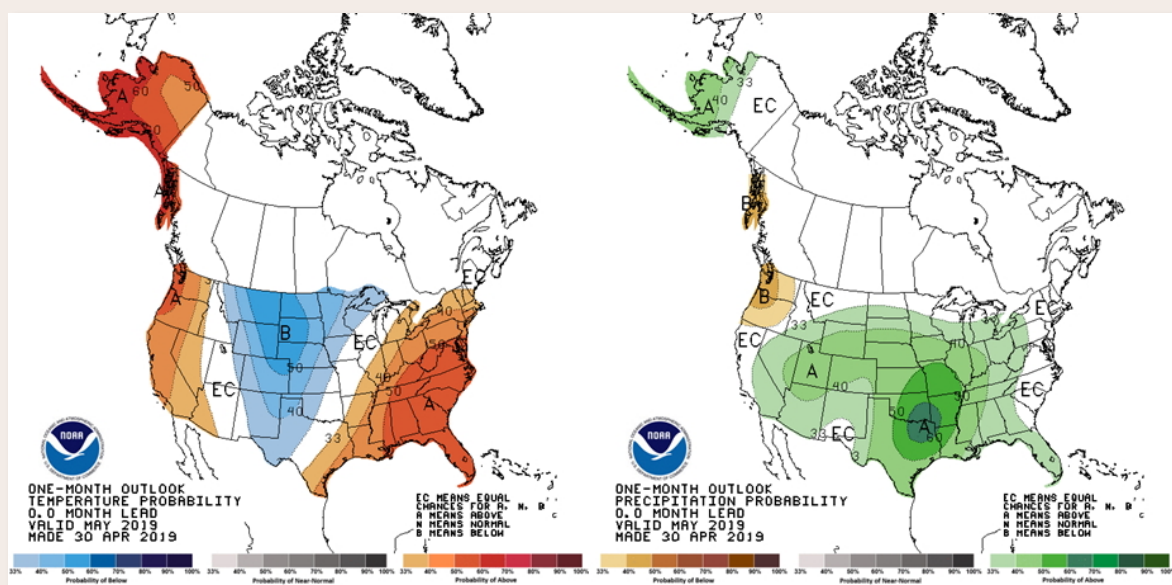


Figure 7.4

NOAA CPC operational 3-category (above or below normal) probabilistic outlooks for month 1 for temperature (left) and precipitation (right). (Source: NOAA CPC; <https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/30day/>)

Assessing forecast skill for sub-seasonal (and seasonal) forecasts

A single probabilistic forecast cannot, in general, be verified or falsified. But we can evaluate the performance of the forecast system by comparing a set of many forecasts over a period of years with observations, and by deriving statistical metrics of skill. These skill estimates are based on the performance of the forecast system in the past, or of a set of hindcasts that have been produced as if the current system had been operating over that period. This information can guide users about the expected performance of the forecasts of the future, but past performance is no guarantee of the same skill continuing into the future (Weisheimer and Palmer 2014).

In general, the skill of climate forecasts varies much more over space and time than does the skill of weather forecasts (Mariotti et al. 2020). Importantly, some seasons are more amenable to skillful forecasts than others, and this will be noted in the text and tables below. There has also been recent progress in identifying, in real-time, windows of opportunity during which climate forecasts are more likely to be skillful—i.e., times when there are particularly large events in the tropics (MJO, ENSO) or the stratosphere that are likely to have a large imprint in the weather of the extratropics, including the western U.S. (Albers and Newman 2019; Mariotti et al. 2020).

Skill of CPC week 3-4 forecasts for CONUS

Skill evaluation for the CPC weeks 3-4 operational outlooks is available only in aggregate for the conterminous United States (CONUS). In the Heidke skill score (HSS), 100 is a perfect forecast, -50 is a completely incorrect forecast, and a score above 0 indicates skill versus a random forecast. Over the 4-year period from September 2015 to May 2019, the Heidke skill scores for the CPC weeks 3-4 outlooks for CONUS averaged about 40 for temperature, and about 10 for precipitation.

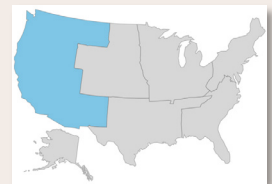
Skill of CPC 30-day forecasts for CONUS and the basin

The skill of the CPC operational 30-day forecasts (at 0.5 month lead time) can be explored using CPC's interactive [Verification Web Tool](https://vwt.ncep.noaa.gov/). The skill (HSS) of the temperature forecasts CONUS-wide has averaged about 10 since 2015, though higher, averaging about 20, since 2005. The precipitation forecasts have had no skill, on average, since 2005 (HSS = ~0), with no improvement in recent years. Across the Upper Basin states of Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado, the 30-day temperature forecasts have been more skillful than for CONUS (HSS = 24 since 2005; HSS = 28 since 2015). The precipitation forecasts for Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado have been more skillful than for CONUS (HSS = 7 since 2005), and skill has not increased over time.

Skill of CFSv2 model forecasts for the Colorado River Basin

As described above, the CFSv2 model forecasts are one of the tools used as guidance for the CPC sub-seasonal forecasts. We show the skill of CFSv2 alone to allow comparison with the skill of the model over the weather forecast period (Table 7.1). In general, the AC skill of weeks 3-4 forecasts (i.e., for 15–28 days out) from the CFSv2 model is low (<0.2) for both precipitation and temperature in the Upper and Lower Basins (Table 7.2). Skill is generally lower in the Upper Basin, especially for precipitation (<0.1), perhaps reflecting the weaker ENSO signal there.

CPC Verification Web Tool



Link:
<https://vwt.ncep.noaa.gov/>

Table 7.2

Skill (Anomaly Correlation; AC) for week 3-4 (15-28 days out) forecasts from the CFSv2 model for the calendar year (annual) and the climatological seasons, based on reforecasts for the 1999-2010 period. The skill scores for the eight HUC4 sub-basins each in the Upper Basin and Lower Basin were averaged to the basin-wide scores shown here. The CFSv2 forecasts were bias-corrected using quantile mapping. (Data: S2S Outlooks for Watersheds; <http://hydro.rap.ucar.edu/s2s/>)

Skill (AC) for Weeks 3-4 forecasts, CFSv2 model						
Variable	Basin	Annual	DJF	MAM	JJA	SON
Precipitation	Upper Basin	0.09	0.09	0.07	0.11	0.10
	Lower Basin	0.16	0.18	0.11	0.13	0.14
Temperature	Upper Basin	0.16	0.22	0.03	0.22	0.18
	Lower Basin	0.18	0.23	0.10	0.23	0.21

S2S Climate Outlooks for Watersheds

The “S2S Climate Outlook for Watersheds” effort is a collaboration between NCAR, CU Boulder, Reclamation, and NOAA CPC to improve the understanding and application of sub-seasonal climate forecast products in the hydrology and water management sector, and to test the capacity to generate new forecast products (Baker, Wood, and Rajagopalan 2019). The [map-based web tool](#) (Figure 7.5) shows real-time forecasts from CFSv2 with additional post-processing, and also real-time forecasts from the NMME ensemble. (Again, CFSv2 and NMME output are key elements of the operational CPC weeks 3–4, monthly, and seasonal outlooks, but the CPC outlooks incorporate additional guidance.) Reforecasts have been generated from both sets of models to allow for verification and skill assessment.

The web tool displays deterministic (single-value) precipitation and temperature forecasts from CFSv2 for weeks 1–2, weeks 2–3, and weeks 3–4, and from the NMME for forecasts of 1-month periods at 3 different lead times: 0, 1 month, and 2 months. The forecasted values are expressed in anomalies to allow users to more easily assess whether conditions are expected to be above or below normal. The interface allows users to select any HUC4 watersheds, including the 8 sub-basins of the Upper Basin and the 8 sub-basins of the Lower Basin, and see the forecast values (and skill scores) specific to that watershed. The tool allows users to view the ensemble average of the NMME, as well as the seven model outputs

individually; toggling between the outputs of the individual models provides some sense of the uncertainty in the forecasts.

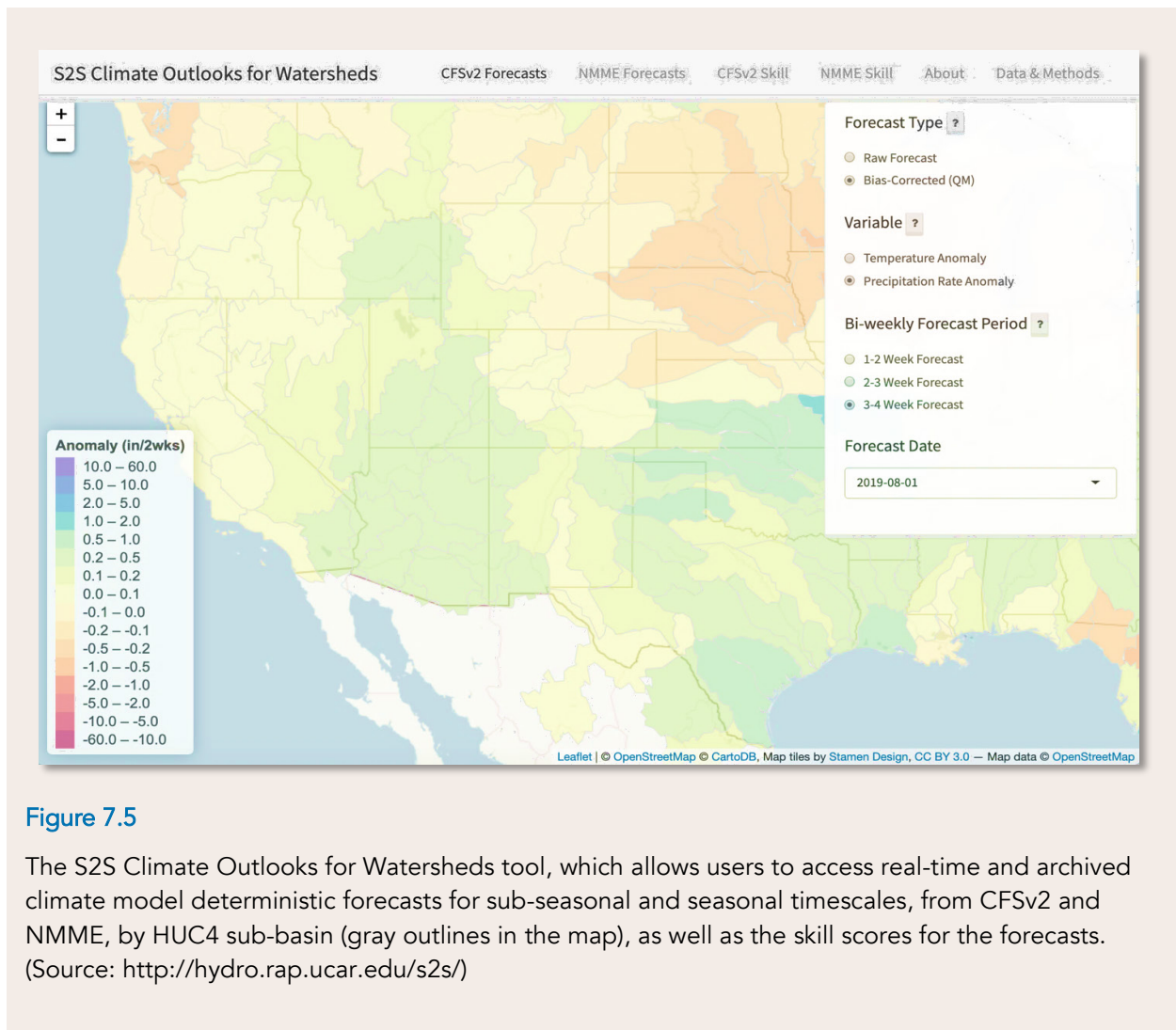


Figure 7.5

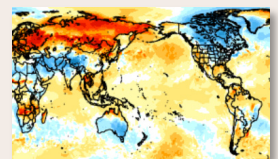
The S2S Climate Outlooks for Watersheds tool, which allows users to access real-time and archived climate model deterministic forecasts for sub-seasonal and seasonal timescales, from CFSv2 and NMME, by HUC4 sub-basin (gray outlines in the map), as well as the skill scores for the forecasts. (Source: <http://hydro.rap.ucar.edu/s2s/>)

Other activities to improve sub-seasonal forecasts and their use

SubX

The NOAA-funded Subseasonal Experiment (SubX) is a coordinated set of sub-seasonal prediction efforts and data archiving intended to explore the value of a multi-model ensemble for sub-seasonal forecasting (Pegion et al. 2019). This program was modeled after the NMME for seasonal forecasts (see next section). The SubX effort includes historical reforecasts (i.e., hindcasts) for 1999–2015 and real-time forecasts from seven modeling systems. Real-time forecast maps from the various models and from the multi-model ensemble are available on the SubX [website](http://cola.gmu.edu/subx/).

Subseasonal Experiment—SubX



Link:
<http://cola.gmu.edu/subx/>

Sub-Seasonal Forecast Rodeo

To promote the development of novel S2S forecasting methodologies, the Reclamation R&D program, in collaboration with NOAA and the California Department of Water Resources, held a Sub-Seasonal Forecast Rodeo from spring 2017 to spring 2018. Six teams of forecasters responded to an open public call and competed to produce the most skillful forecasts of temperature and precipitation across CONUS for weeks 3–4 (15–28 days out) and weeks 5–6 (29–42 days out). The forecasts were issued every two weeks for one year, with forecasts from the CFSv2 model used as a benchmark. Between one and three teams produced forecasts better than CFSv2, depending on the variable and lead time, with the most notable improvements seen in precipitation, for which CFSv2 showed almost no skill during the year-long contest period. (Note that in any given 1-year-period, CFSv2 and other forecast models and methods may significantly overperform or underperform relative to their longer-term skill, due to variability in the climate.) The methods of the winning teams will be made publicly available to potentially improve operational sub-seasonal forecasts. A second Sub-Seasonal Forecast Rodeo began in summer 2019.

S2S workshops

The Western States Water Council and the California Department of Water Resources have co-sponsored a series of workshops to further dialogue among western states' water agencies and Reclamation, NOAA, and the research community on improving S2S precipitation forecasting to support water management decision making in the western U.S. The most recent workshop, in May 2018, included presentations on the operational and planning needs for seasonal climate forecasting in the Colorado River Basin, the mechanisms of cool-season precipitation in the Upper Basin, and climate forecasting challenges in the Upper Basin in the context of CBRFC streamflow forecasting.

Implications for the Colorado River Basin

While there is active research in all the areas of untapped sources of skill, it is hard to anticipate what the combined effect of many incremental improvements will be, including general improvements in weather and climate models and coupled (land-atmosphere-ocean) data assimilation, which are ongoing and will continue. The goal of much of this research is to push the boundaries of skillful and potentially useful probabilistic weather prediction into weeks 3 and 4, and this is where advances in skill are most likely to come, albeit from a relatively low baseline at present (e.g., Table 7.2).

Likewise, it is unclear whether any of the proposed pathways to improve skill discussed above will result in improved sub-seasonal forecasts specific to the Colorado River Basin. Based on the current literature, there is an indication that the Lower Basin may benefit from forecast improvements

Forecast Rodeo II



Link:

<https://www.drought.gov/drought/forecast-rodeo-ii-leaderboard>

more than the Upper Basin. In particular, better representing combined effects of the MJO and QBO may improve precipitation forecast skill in the Lower Basin. The MJO is also known to modulate tropical cyclones in the eastern Pacific that occasionally cause heavy precipitation and flooding in the Lower Basin (Maloney and Hartmann 2000; Klotzbach 2014). It is plausible that the influence of the MJO on atmospheric rivers could, on occasion, affect the Upper Basin, but this has yet to be demonstrated. Improvement in treatment of the land surface and its influence on the atmosphere may lead to improvements in prediction of North American Monsoon precipitation that primarily affects the Lower Basin.

But even without significant improvements in overall forecast skill, there is still plenty of room to improve how the current skill of existing forecast systems is deployed by users of forecasts. The recent progress toward identifying “forecasts of opportunity” (Albers and Newman 2019; Mariotti et al. 2020) is a promising step toward more strategic deployment of sub-seasonal climate forecasts, i.e., consulting them in those locations, and during those seasons and specific times, when they are likely to have the most skill.

7.5 Seasonal climate forecasting

Overview and sources of predictability

The interest in predicting the climate on seasonal time scales to prepare for anomalous conditions is longstanding. The earliest published scientific effort in seasonal climate prediction was motivated by back-to-back failures of the Indian monsoon in 1876 and 1877 that caused a catastrophic drought (Blanford 1884). Blanford’s investigation found that an abundant spring snowpack in the Himalayas was counterproductive for the Indian monsoon later that summer—an early insight into seasonal land surface feedbacks.

The effort to understand and predict the Indian Monsoon also fostered research by Sir Gilbert Walker in the early 1900s into the “Southern Oscillation,” which is now understood as the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon (Chapter 2). A major breakthrough in the understanding of the functioning and influence of ENSO, and ultimately for seasonal climate forecasting, was the insight that ENSO was a coupled ocean–atmosphere phenomenon (Bjerknes 1966; 1969). It was later recognized that El Niño events resembled each other enough that it made sense to average them into a typical or canonical sequence (Rasmusson and Carpenter 1982). Such “compositing” became a key tool in unlocking the typical ENSO footprint of climate anomalies over North America (Ropelewski and Halpert 1987; 1989).

A general assumption in seasonal climate prediction is that the climate system displays preferred and recognizable patterns (footprints) that can be revealed through physical reasoning or statistical means. The search for analogues (Van den Dool 1994) is driven by the same notion that certain circulation patterns are more common than others, such as an enhanced southern winter storm track across the U.S. during El Niño. (CPC's empirical climate prediction methods that use the concepts of footprints and analogues is discussed in the next section.)

During the late 20th century, dynamical, fully physical climate models were increasingly run to simulate atmospheric conditions forced by (specified) anomalous sea surface temperature (SST) states to see whether the models could reproduce observed atmospheric behavior. As with short-term weather forecasts, the fast changing initial conditions in the atmosphere need to be captured to solve that portion of the forecast problem, while more slowly evolving conditions of the land and ocean were originally modeled as static boundary conditions (Gates et al. 1992).

Once it became clear that the modeled atmospheric behavior was realistic, the next step was to develop coupled ocean-atmosphere models that could be used to explore climate changes (i.e., GCMs; Chapter 11). These models were tested and refined by predicting ENSO events as well as seasonal climate anomalies (e.g., Becker, Van den Dool, and Zhang 2014; Bellenger et al. 2014; Weisheimer and Palmer 2014). These coupled Earth system models explicitly include evolving, rather than fixed, SST and land surface conditions. There are now more than a dozen coupled models that predict the state of ENSO in an operational manner, with highly variable, though overall positive, forecast skill (Barnston et al. 2012; 2017; Tippett et al. 2017). A key development in seasonal forecasting beyond ENSO was the discovery that global drought footprints of the swings of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) and the Atlantic Multi-decadal Oscillation (AMO) could be reproduced in coupled climate models (Schubert et al. 2009), though this discovery has yet to pay dividends for the Colorado River Basin (Chapter 2).

The current predictability and skill in seasonal forecasts still comes mainly from those sources identified during the long history of seasonal forecasting: the tendencies associated with key modes of ocean-atmosphere variability, primarily ENSO, other slowly varying processes such as land surface feedbacks, and robust long-term trends (e.g., warming temperatures).

Operational seasonal climate forecasts from NOAA CPC

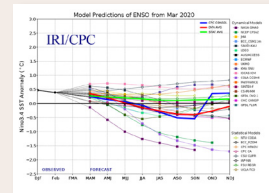
NOAA CPC and its predecessors have made a huge cumulative investment in developing and refining their seasonal forecasting methodology over several decades. While there are many other entities and individuals producing seasonal climate forecasts, ranging from the ECMWF to private

consulting firms, the CPC forecasts are the most widely used in the U.S., across a broad spectrum of users, including in water resources, and serve as a benchmark for other efforts.

Starting in 1995, CPC settled on the current framework of seasonal (3-month) forecasts (called “outlooks”) with multiple lead times out to 12.5 months. The two key ingredients supporting this framework were 1) the increasing community efforts to monitor and predict ENSO, as synthesized in a monthly updated [IRI ENSO “plume”](#) (Barnston et al. 2012); and 2) the development of the “Optimal Climate Normals” (OCN) methodology that takes advantage of longer-term climate variability and trends, whether linked to climate change or not. [The CPC seasonal forecasts](#) are released monthly, on the third Thursday of each month.

Figure 7.6 shows the January 2020 forecast for February–April 2020 (0.5 month lead time). These tercile forecasts are made in reference to the upper/middle/lower thirds of the 1981–2010 climatology (10 cases each), and the color shading shows tilts in the odds of one of the terciles in the climatological distribution (33%/33%/33%). For example, the darker brown shading for “B(elow)” in the precipitation outlook in Figure 7.6 means there is a 40–49% probability of seasonal precipitation for February–April being in the lower third of the historical distribution, compared to the

IRI/CPC ENSO Predictions Plume



Link:

https://iri.columbia.edu/our-expertise/climate/forecasts/ens/current/?ens_o_tab=ens-sst_table

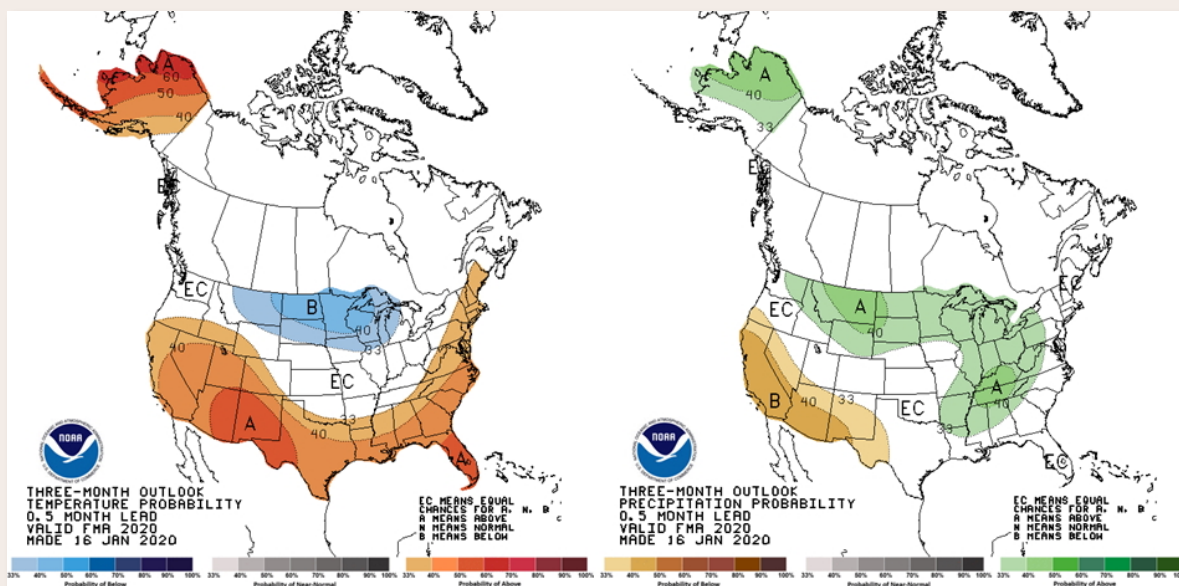


Figure 7.6

CPC seasonal outlooks for February–April 2020 for temperature (left) and precipitation (right), released on January 16, 2020. Darker shading shows tilts in the odds relative to the climatological (1981–2010) distribution of outcomes; see the text for further explanation. (Source: NOAA CPC; https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/long_range/)

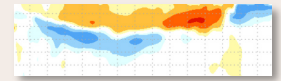
climatological probability of 33% for that outcome. If there is no appreciable tilt for any tercile, equal chances (“EC”) are assigned.

CPC also produces a weekly [ENSO status update](#), and an [ENSO blog](#); both can be helpful in interpreting the physical mechanisms behind the seasonal forecasts.

Forecast tools

CPC uses a broad suite of forecast tools for seasonal forecasts, comprising both empirical (statistical) models and dynamical climate forecast models (Table 7.3). The two most important empirical tools are based on ENSO and Optimal Climate Normals (OCN), respectively. The other tools are Canonical Correlation Analysis (CCA), Ensemble CCA (ECCA), Constructed Analogues (CA), and Screening Multiple Linear Regression (SMLR). These empirical tools and their predecessors were the only quantitative guidance used in CPC forecasts prior to 2005; the dynamical tools were added to the suite of guidance around 2006. CPC provides a short introduction to all tools [online](#).

ENSO: Recent Evolution, Current Status and Predictions



Link:

https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/lanina/enso_evolution-status-fcsts-web.pdf

ENSO Blog

Link:

<https://www.climate.gov/news-features/departments/enso-blog>

Table 7.3

Forecast tools used by NOAA CPC to inform their seasonal climate forecasts. Type: E = empirical; D = dynamical. The empirical tools that use multiple predictors (CCA, ECCA, CA, SMLR) are typically based on these four classes of predictors: 200mb global velocity potential (upper air flow information), global sea surface temperatures (SST), sea-level pressure north of 40°N, and U.S. soil moisture. (Source: NOAA CPC; https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/long_range/tools.php)

Forecast Tool	Type	Usual importance to forecasts	Contribution to forecasts	Comments	Reference
ENSO Composites	E	Higher	Typical climate “footprint” of the current or forecasted ENSO state	The mainstay of CPC seasonal forecasts	Higgins, Kim, and Unger (2004)
Optimal Climate Normals (OCN)	E	Higher	Recent (15-year) trends in temperature and precipitation, if different from longer-term (30-year) normal	During clear-cut El Niño or La Niña events, ENSO composites include OCN information in a single tool	Huang, Van den Dool, and Barnston (1996); Van den Dool (2007)
CFSv2 model	D	Higher	Physically based prediction of future climate conditions	Also included in NMME	Saha et al. (2014)

Forecast Tool	Type	Usual importance to forecasts	Contribution to forecasts	Comments	Reference
NMME model ensemble	D	Higher	Physically based prediction of future climate; ensemble shows uncertainty due to model structure; ensemble mean more skillful than any one model	Ensemble of 7 models: CFSv2 (NOAA); CanCM4i and GEM-NEMO (Canada); FLOR and CM2.1 (NOAA GFDL); CCSM4 (NCAR); GEOS S2S (NASA)	Kirtman et al. (2014)
Canonical Correlation Analysis (CCA)	E	Lower	Influence of multiple predictors of future climate conditions as captured in linear relationships		Barnston (1994)
Ensemble CCA (ECCA)	E	Lower	Same as above	Only used for temperature	Mo (2003)
Constructed Analogues (CA)	E	Lower	Same as above	Most useful when analogues are based on soil moisture	Van den Dool (1994; 2003)
Screening Multiple Linear Regression (SMLR)	E	Lower	Same as above	Refined version of MLR tools used by early forecasters	O'Lenic et al. (2008)

As mentioned before, ENSO information and OCN have been the primary tools since the 1990s; as new forecast tools were added, each needed to have a skill assessment using reforecasts. The dynamical coupled forecast models (CFSv2 and the NMME ensemble) were evaluated even more critically; they had to reproduce empirical ENSO results before being included as guidance. When the consensus among the different tools is strong, that information is used to tweak the odds in the forecasts (e.g., moving from a 40% to 50% probability for the wettest tercile). Particularly strong ENSO signals, or regional trends, like the warming trend in the western U.S., will tend to yield high “tilts” in the odds.

Operational skill of CPC seasonal forecasts

CPC has archived all 0.5-month lead forecasts since 1995 and their national skill scores are [online](#). The long-term (1995–2019) average Heidke skill score (HSS) for temperature has been 14, while the average HSS for precipitation has been 4, where 100 is perfect skill and 0 is no skill. As with sub-seasonal forecasts, seasonal forecasts in general are more skillful for temperature

than for precipitation. This disparity has been seen across the globe by different forecasting groups; e.g., Weisheimer and Palmer (2014)

(As described earlier in this chapter, Heidke skill is based on “hits”; if 20 of 60 seasonal forecasts “hit” for the correct tercile—as would be expected by chance alone—the skill score is 0; if all 60 are correct, the skill score is 100, and if none of them are correct, the score is -50.)

The skill of the CPC seasonal forecasts has been highly variable over time, with several periods during which the temperature forecasts had an HSS over 50 and precipitation forecasts had an HSS over 30. Conversely, there have been many periods of negative skill (<0), especially for precipitation. Most of the variation appears to correspond to the strength of ENSO events; when moderate to strong El Niño and La Niña events emerge, the ENSO forecast models generally perform better (Barnston et al. 2012), and the footprints of ENSO impacts on the western U.S. are more predictable. Livezey and Timofeyeva (2008) showed that most of the nationwide skill of the first decade (1995–2005) of seasonal CPC forecasts was due to the “Super El Niño” of 1997–98, the long-lived La Niña of 1998–2001, and other strong ENSO events. During periods when ENSO-neutral conditions prevail, seasonal forecasts in the U.S. are generally less skillful.

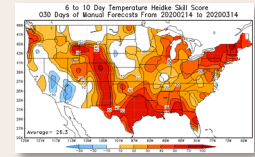
Regional skill in the Colorado River Basin

Skill of operational seasonal outlooks for the Colorado River Basin

The Upper Basin was identified early on as an area of relatively weak to non-existent ENSO signals in precipitation, compared to the ends of the ENSO dipole: El Niño wetness in the Southwest and La Niña wetness in the Northwest (Redmond and Koch 1991; see Chapter 2). Thus, CPC’s early ENSO-related forecasts often left the Upper Basin blank, or EC, except for the 1997–98 super El Niño. Wolter et al. (1999) uncovered more nuance in the ENSO signal, finding distinct seasonality in the Upper Basin’s response to ENSO.

Maps of skill for the CPC seasonal precipitation outlooks issued from 1995–2019 are shown in Figure 7.7, for the four 3-month seasons of the water year. For the Upper Basin, skill has been highest in late winter (JFM) and spring (AMJ), hitting Heidke skill scores of up to 20 along the southern periphery of the Upper Basin. In contrast, late summer and fall forecasts have shown no overall skill across the 1995–2019 period. For the Lower Basin, skill has been highest in late winter (JFM), with skill scores up to 40 in western New Mexico and at least 30 in nearly all of the Lower Basin. This seasonal peak in skill mainly reflects the footprint of ENSO events being expressed most strongly in late winter. There has been less skill or no skill in the other three seasons, except for northwestern Arizona in spring.

CPC Verification Summary



Link:

<https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/verification/summary/>

During the most recent decade (2010–2019) skill during late winter (JFM) over the Lower Basin has been higher than during the full period as shown in Figure 7.7. Also, during 2010–2019, skill during spring (AMJ) has been much higher in both the Upper and Lower Basins than during the full period. This recent performance may reflect improvements in the forecast system and thus might be expected to continue. Figure 7.8 shows maps of skill for the CPC seasonal temperature outlooks issued from 1995–2019, for the four, 3-month seasons of the water year. For both the Upper Basin and Lower Basin, positive skill is seen in all four seasons, with somewhat higher skill for the Lower Basin. The HSS is over 50 for large portions of the Lower Basin in all four seasons, and portions of the Upper Basin in spring and summer. Much of the skill in temperature outlooks in the western U.S. is due to the consistent increasing trends in seasonal and annual temperature, as captured in the OCN tool.

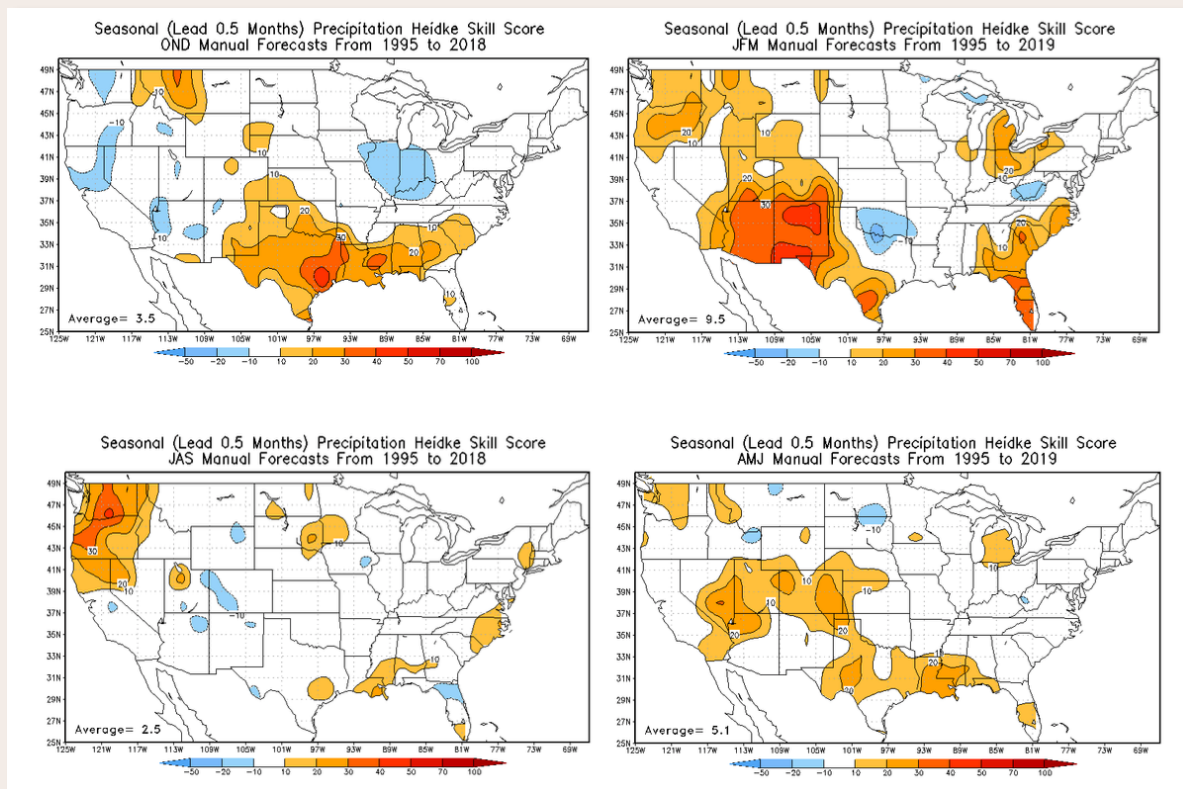


Figure 7.7

Maps of CPC seasonal precipitation forecast skill (Heidke Skill Score; HSS) from 1995–2019, using seasons that correspond to quarters of the water year: October–December (upper left); January–March (upper right); April–June (lower right); and July–September (lower left). Positive skill (orange colors) in the Upper Basin is limited to winter-spring (JFM and AMJ; (HSS=10–20). In the Lower Basin, positive skill is seen mainly in winter (JFM) and is higher (30–40) than in the Upper Basin. (Source: NOAA CPC; <https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/verification/summary/>)

Skill of NMME model forecasts for the Colorado River Basin

As described above, the NMME dynamical model ensemble is one of the tools now used by CPC forecasters to inform operational seasonal forecasts for the Upper and Lower Basin. In Table 7.4, the skill scores for NMME forecasts for season 1 (1–90 days out) are shown for the Upper and Lower Basin. As with the sub-seasonal model forecasts from NMME and CFSv2, temperature is forecasted more skillfully than precipitation, and the Lower Basin seasonal climate is more skillfully forecasted than in the Upper Basin.

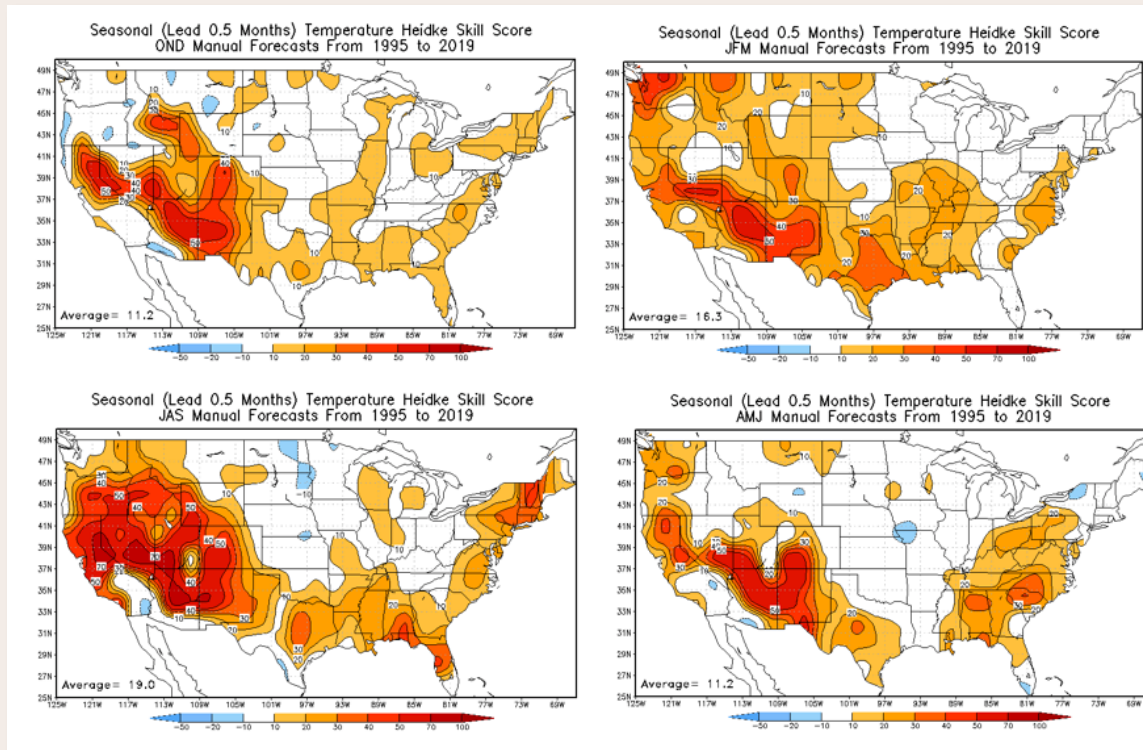


Figure 7.8

Maps of CPC seasonal temperature forecast skill (Heidke Skill Score; HSS) from 1995–2019, using seasons that correspond to quarters of the water year: October–December (upper left); January–March (upper right); April–June (lower right); and July–September (lower left). Positive skill (orange and red colors) is seen in both the Upper Basin and Lower Basin in all seasons, with the highest overall skill in late summer (July–September). (Source: NOAA CPC; <https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/verification/summary/>)

Table 7.4

Skill (Anomaly Correlation; AC) for Season 1 (1–90 days out) forecasts from the NMME forecast ensemble (7 models, including CFSv2) across the calendar year (annual) and for the climatological seasons, based on reforecasts for the 1981–2010 period. The skill scores for the eight HUC4 sub-basins each in the Upper Basin and Lower Basin were averaged to the basin-wide scores shown here. (Data: S2S Outlooks for Watersheds; <http://hydro.rap.ucar.edu/s2s/>)

Skill (AC) for Season 1 forecasts, NMME ensemble						
Variable	Basin	Annual	DJF	MAM	JJA	SON
Precipitation	Upper Basin	0.19	0.19	0.29	0.11	0.15
	Lower Basin	0.27	0.41	0.28	0.09	0.20
Temperature	Upper Basin	0.19	0.12	0.25	0.24	0.20
	Lower Basin	0.31	0.28	0.31	0.30	0.36

As with the operational CPC forecasts—which incorporate the NMME along with other guidance (Figure 7.7)—the NMME results in Table 7.4 indicate that predictability in seasonal precipitation is greater in the winter and spring than in the summer and fall, with a spring peak in the Upper Basin and winter peak in the Lower Basin—which is helpful, since the former two seasons best correspond to snowpack accumulation and water-year runoff. However, even in winter and spring, seasonal forecast skill is still relatively low.

Activities to improve seasonal forecast skill in the Colorado River Basin

SWcasts—precipitation outlooks for the interior Southwest

Since ENSO only explains a fraction of seasonal climate variability in the interior Southwest (Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona), and since SNOTEL information was not incorporated into climate divisions (nor CPC forecasts), Wolter (2002) embarked on an effort in the late 1990s to create statistical seasonal forecasts (SWCasts) that increased the pool of predictors beyond ENSO, and improve the temperature and precipitation predictands by including SNOTEL data (Chapter 5). To create forecast zones within the 4-state region, SNOTEL and weather stations were grouped into core regions using statistical analyses to select the most similar ones, with one set of 6–10 regions each for four meteorological seasons.

For potential predictors, previously established teleconnection indices (e.g., ENSO indices, North Atlantic Oscillation, etc.), as well as tropical Pacific or

Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Mexico SSTs were considered. Some predictors had been discovered a century ago, such as key sea-level pressure regions in the Pacific and Indian oceans. Inspired by Knaff and Landsea (1997) and similar to O'Lenic et al. (2008), SWcasts employs Screening Multiple Linear Regression (SMLR) as a statistical forecast tool. Over the following 16 years of forecasts, the balance of “hits” versus “misses” was sufficiently positive to translate into positive skill scores. During this period, forecast skill for the Upper Basin (in CO and UT) was worst during fall and best during winter and summer. While there were pockets of exceptional skill during winter (southeast CO) and summer (central NM and northern UT), overall skill scores were not significantly higher than for the CPC operational seasonal forecasts (Figure 7.7).

While the production and issuance of SWcasts ended in 2018, a renewed effort at regional statistical forecasts could capitalize on two decades of additional training data for both predictors and predictands, and improved forecast schemes.

Seasonal forecasts of SWE using GCMs

Kapnick et al. (2018) drew widespread attention with their claim of skillful prediction of regional snowpack (SWE) conditions up to 8 months in advance using a suite of coupled climate models (i.e., GCMs) developed by NOAA GFDL to generate hindcasts for the 1981–2015 period. While they show skill over the western U.S. overall (average correlation of 0.48) and in many sub-regions, the lowest skill (correlation of about 0.30) was found in their Colorado Rockies sub-region, which comprises western Colorado and is the source of about 70% of Upper Basin streamflow. So the relevance of their findings for the Colorado River Basin is more limited than for other regions. Overall, their spatial patterns of skill in predicting snowpack, temperature, precipitation, and storm tracks strongly suggest that they have largely rediscovered the well-known ENSO influence on western U.S. hydroclimate, rather than a truly novel capability of GCMs.

Year 2 predictability during La Niña events

Wolter and Timlin (2011) diagnosed that La Niña events have a much higher propensity for multi-year extension than El Niño events. More importantly, there is a strong tendency for a second-year La Niña to be significantly drier in the Upper Colorado River Basin than the first year. Two of the most severe multi-year droughts since 1950 (mid-1950s and early 2000s) were anchored by such long-lived La Niñas. This tendency was seen again in the two-year La Niña events of 2011–2013 and 2016–2018. Okumura, DiNezio, and Deser (2017) independently confirmed this observation of a drier second year during La Niña. However, this only covers a subset of years, and two-year La Niñas are not guaranteed once a La Niña event sets in.

Implications for the Colorado River Basin

The fundamental challenge inhibiting skillful seasonal climate forecasting in the Upper Basin is the same as that at the start of CPC's operational forecasts almost 25 years ago: Seasonal forecasting skill across the western U.S.—and in most of the world—is largely predicated on ENSO signals, especially for precipitation, but those ENSO signals are overall weak or cancel out on the scale of the entire Upper Basin, and across the fall–winter–spring seasons when most of the water supply is generated. However, there appears to be enough skill for there to be a benefit using climate forecast model output to slightly tilt or weight the ensemble of CBRFC seasonal streamflow forecasts for the Upper Basin, as was done in work by Baker (2019) (Chapter 8.) For the Lower Basin, seasonal climate forecast skill is generally higher than in the Upper Basin, but still much lower than for weather forecasts.

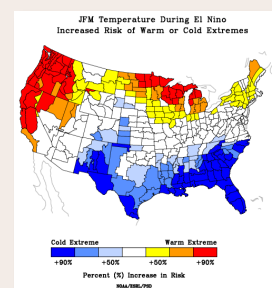
As with sub-seasonal forecasts, perhaps the shortest pathway to “improvement” is for forecast users to judiciously and selectively use seasonal climate forecasts, consulting them only during those seasons, and during those ENSO states (i.e., moderate to strong El Niño and La Niña events) in which more predictability and skill is seen (Figure 7.7 and Table 7.4). A potentially helpful information source in this regard is the NOAA PSD [ENSO climate risk tool](https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/enso/climaterisks/) that shows which climate divisions have significantly increased or decreased risk of seasonal wet and dry extremes (>80th percentile) during moderate to strong ENSO events. During some strong ENSO events, the CBRFC has used ENSO information to adjust streamflow forecasts in the Lower Basin through trace-weighting (see Chapter 8).

7.6 Challenges and opportunities

While there are still many challenges being tackled by the weather forecasting research community to obtain greater understanding and predictive skill, the level of performance and skill is already relatively high, and progressing well. Thus, from the perspective of water supply forecasting and management, the most pressing challenges and most compelling opportunities are at sub-seasonal and seasonal timescales. In the Colorado River Basin, and the Upper Basin especially, the limited skill of sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasts for precipitation and even temperature constrains usability.

There is no single pathway toward improvement in the skill and usability of climate forecasts for the basin. There are, though, broad families of ongoing activities that in combination can lead to such improvement. It is probably neither feasible nor desirable to coordinate all of these activities, since many of them connect with efforts at broader scales; what is important is

Risk of Seasonal Climate Extremes in the U.S. Related to ENSO



Link:

<https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/enso/climaterisks/>

that researchers, funders, and stakeholders are at least made aware of the suite of activities, for example, through the Western States Water Council-California Department of Water Resources workshop series. And, given the history and current state of climate forecasting, no one should expect easy wins producing large gains in skill or usability; incremental improvement is the likeliest outcome of any effort.

Challenge

Limitations in our understanding of the connections between atmospheric and oceanic circulation patterns and processes, and Colorado River Basin precipitation variability in space and time, constrain the skill of climate forecast models in forecasting conditions for the basin.

Opportunities

- Support further research into these climate system dynamics to identify key patterns and variables.
- Support further research into better representing those key patterns and variables in dynamical climate forecast models and statistical forecast tools.

Challenge

The CBRFC and other streamflow forecasting units may not be able to capitalize on the skill that does exist in sub-seasonal and seasonal climate forecasts for the basin.

Opportunities

- Support ongoing CBRFC efforts to pilot the inclusion of sub-seasonal and seasonal forecasts in their forecast system (see Chapter 8).
- Support further research into post-processing of CBRFC forecasts to generate climate-forecast-informed, use-specific streamflow forecasts (see Chapter 8).

Challenge

The limited skill and probabilistic nature of climate forecasts may not mesh well with decision frameworks so water managers are unable to extract value from the forecast information.

Opportunities

- Continue to support engagement between water managers and CPC and other climate forecasters to facilitate shared understanding of decision needs and forecast capabilities.
- Study decision making by users and sectors that make better use of climate forecasts (e.g., crop futures traders), to assess transferability of tools and practices.
- Develop decision support tools that bridge climate forecasts to the water resource decision space.

Challenge

The skill of climate forecasts is highly variable over both space and time, complicating the consistent use of forecasts.

Opportunities

- Selectively consult forecasts during those seasons when they have shown the most skill for the basin.
- Support research to identify “forecasts of opportunity” specific to the basin, i.e., conditions of the ocean, atmosphere, and land surface during which forecasts are more likely to have skill and impact.

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Glossary

ablation

The loss of snow from the snowpack due to melting, evaporation, or wind.

absolute error

The difference between the measured and actual values of x .

albedo

The percentage of incoming light that is reflected off of a surface.

aleatory uncertainty

Uncertainty due to randomness in the behavior of a system (i.e., natural variability)

anomaly

A deviation from the expected or normal value.

atmospheric river (AR)

A long and concentrated plume of low-level (<5,000') moisture originating in the tropical Pacific.

autocorrelation

Correlation between consecutive values of the same time series, typically due to time-dependencies in the dataset.

bank storage

Water that seeps into and out of the bed and banks of a stream, lake, or reservoir depending on relative water levels.

bias correction

Adjustments to raw model output (e.g., from a climate model, or streamflow forecast model) using observations in a reference period.

boundary conditions

Conditions that govern the evolution of climate for a given area (e.g., ocean heat flux, soil moisture, sea-ice and snowpack conditions) and can help forecast the future climate state when included in a model.

calibration

The process of comparing a model with the real system, followed by multiple revisions and comparisons so that the model outputs more closely resemble outcomes in the real system.

climate forcing

A factor causing a difference between the incoming and outgoing energy of the Earth's climate system, e.g., increases in greenhouse-gas concentrations.

climatology

In forecasting and modeling, refers to the historical average climate used as a baseline (e.g., "compared to climatology"). Synonymous with climate normal.

coefficient of variation (CV)

A common measure of variability in a dataset; the standard deviation divided by the mean.

consumptive use

The amount of diverted water that is lost during usage via evapotranspiration, evaporation, or seepage and is thus unavailable for subsequent use.

convection

The vertical transport of heat and moisture in the atmosphere, typically due to an air parcel rising if it is warmer than the surrounding atmosphere.

covariate

A variable (e.g., temperature) whose value changes when the variable under study changes (e.g., precipitation).

cross-correlation

A method for estimating to what degree two variables or datasets are correlated.

cumulative distribution function (CDF)

A function describing the probability that a random variable, such as streamflow, is less than or equal to a specified value. CDF-based probabilities are often expressed in terms of percent exceedance or non-exceedance.

Darcy's Law

The mathematical expression that describes fluid flow through a porous medium (e.g., soil).

datum

The base, or 0.0-foot gage-height (stage), for a stream gage.

dead pool

The point at which the water level of a lake or reservoir is so low, water can no longer be discharged or released downstream.

deterministic

Referring to a system or model in which a given input always produces the same output; the input strictly determines the output.

dewpoint

The local temperature that the air would need to be cooled to (assuming atmospheric pressure and moisture content are constant) in order to achieve a relative humidity (RH) of 100%.

dipole

A pair of two equal and opposing centers of action, usually separated by a distance.

discharge

Volume of water flowing past a given point in the stream in a given period of time; synonymous with streamflow.

distributed

In hydrologic modeling, a distributed model explicitly accounts for spatial variability by dividing basins into grid cells. Contrast with **lumped model**.

downscaling

Method to take data at coarse scales, e.g., from a GCM, and translate those data to more local scales.

dynamical

In modeling, refers to the use of a physical model, i.e., basic physical equations represent some or most of the relevant processes.

environmental flow

Water that is left in or released into a river to manage the quantity, quality, and timing of flow in order to sustain the river's ecosystem.

epistemic uncertainty

Uncertainty due to incomplete knowledge of the behavior of a system.

evapotranspiration

A combination of evaporation from the land surface and water bodies, and transpiration of water from plant surfaces to the atmosphere. Generally includes sublimation from the snow surface as well.

fixed lapse rate

A constant rate of change of an atmospheric variable, usually temperature, with elevation.

flow routing

The process of determining the flow hydrograph at sequential points along a stream based on a known hydrograph upstream.

forcing - see **climate forcing** or **weather forcing**

forecast

A prediction of future hydrologic or climate conditions based on the initial (current) conditions and factors known to influence the evolution of the physical system.

Gaussian filter

A mathematical filter used to remove noise and emphasize a specific frequency of a signal; uses a bell-shaped statistical distribution.

gridded data

Data that is represented in a two-dimensional gridded matrix of graphical contours, interpolated or otherwise derived from a set of point observations.

heat flux

The rate of heat energy transfer from one surface or layer of the atmosphere to the next.

hindcast

A forecast run for a past date or period, using the same model version as for real-time forecasts; used for model calibration and to "spin up" forecast models. Same as **reforecast**.

hydraulic conductivity

A measure of the ease with which water flows through a medium, such as soil or sediment.

hydroclimate

The aggregate of climatic and hydrologic processes and characteristics, and linkages between them, for a watershed or region.

hydrograph

A graph of the volume of water flowing past a location per unit time.

hydrometeorology

A branch of meteorology and hydrology that studies the transfer of water and energy between the land surface and the lower atmosphere.

imaging spectrometer

An instrument used for measuring wavelengths of light spectra in order to create a spectrally-resolved image of an object or area.

in situ

Referring to a ground-based measurement site that is fixed in place.

inhomogeneity

A change in the mean or variance of a time-series of data (such as weather observations) that is caused by changes in the observing station or network, not in the climate itself.

Interim Guidelines

The Colorado River Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin Shortages and Coordinated Operations for Lake Powell and Lake Mead, signed by the Secretary of the Interior in December 2007. The guidelines expire in 2026. <https://www.usbr.gov/lc/region/programs/strategies.html>

internal variability

Variability in climate that comes from chaotic and unpredictable fluctuations of the Earth's oceans and atmosphere.

interpolation

The process of calculating the value of a function or set of data between two known values.

isothermal

A dynamic in which temperature remains constant while other aspects of the system change.

jet stream

A narrow band of very strong winds in the upper atmosphere that follows the boundary between warmer and colder air masses.

kriging

A smoothing technique that calculates minimum error-variance estimates for unsampled values.

kurtosis

A measure of the sharpness of the peak of a probability distribution.

lag-1 autocorrelation

Serial correlation between data values at adjacent time steps.

lapse rate

The rate of change of an atmospheric variable, such as temperature, with elevation. A lapse rate is adiabatic when no heat exchange occurs between the given air parcel and its surroundings.

latency

The lag, relative to real-time, for producing and releasing a dataset that represents real-time conditions.

latent heat flux

The flow of heat from the Earth's surface to the atmosphere that involves evaporation and condensation of water; the energy absorbed/released during a phase change of a substance.

Law of the River

A collection of compacts, federal laws, court decisions and decrees, contracts, and regulatory guidelines that apportions the water and regulates the use and management of the Colorado River among the seven basin states and Mexico.

LiDAR (or lidar)

Light detection and ranging; a remote sensing method which uses pulsed lasers of light to measure the variable distances from the sensor to the land surface.

longwave radiation

Infrared energy emitted by the Earth and its atmosphere at wavelengths between about 5 and 25 micrometers.

Lower Basin

The portions of the Colorado River Basin in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah that are downstream of the Colorado River Compact point at Lee Ferry, Arizona.

lumped model

In hydrologic modeling, a lumped model represents individual sub-basins or elevation zones as a single unit, averaging spatial characteristics across that unit. Contrast with **distributed model**.

Markov chain

A mathematical system in which transitions from one state to another are dependent on the current state and time elapsed.

megadrought

A sustained and widespread drought that lasts at least 10-15 years, though definitions in the literature have varied.

metadata

Data that gives information about other data or describes its own dataset.

mid-latitude cyclone

A large (~500-2000 km) storm system that has a low-pressure center, cyclonic (counter-clockwise) flow, and a cold front. Over the western U.S., **mid-latitude cyclones** almost always move from west to east and are effective at producing precipitation over broad areas.

Minute 319

The binding agreement signed in 2012 by the International Boundary and Water Commission, United States and Mexico, to advance the 1944 Water Treaty between both countries and establish better basin operations and water allocation, and humanitarian measures.

Modoki

An El Niño event that has its warmest SST anomalies located in the central equatorial Pacific; same as "CP" El Niño.

multicollinearity

A condition in which multiple explanatory variables that predict variation in a response variable are themselves correlated with each other.

multiple linear regression

A form of regression in which a model is created by fitting a linear equation over the observed data, typically for two or more explanatory (independent) variables and a response (dependent) variable.

multivariate

Referring to statistical methods in which there are multiple response (dependent) variables being examined.

natural flow

Gaged flow that has been adjusted to remove the effects of upstream human activity such as storage or diversion. Equivalent to **naturalized flow**, **virgin flow**, and **undepleted flow**.

naturalized flow – see *natural flow*

nearest neighbor method

A nonparametric method that examines the distances between a data point (e.g., a sampled value) and the closest data points to it in x-y space ("nearest neighbors," e.g., historical values) and thereby obtains either a classification for the data point (such as wet, dry, or normal) or a set of nearest neighbors (i.e., K-NN).

nonparametric

A statistical method that assumes no underlying mathematical function for a sample of observations.

orographic lift

A process in which air is forced to rise and subsequently cool due to physical barriers such as hills or mountains. This mechanism leads to increased condensation and precipitation over higher terrain.

p

A statistical hypothesis test; the probability of obtaining a particular result purely by chance; a test of statistical significance.

paleohydrology

The study of hydrologic events and processes prior to the instrumental (gaged) record, typically using environmental proxies such as tree rings.

parameterized

Referring to a key variable or factor that is represented in a model by an estimated value (**parameter**) based on observations, rather than being explicitly modeled through physical equations.

parametric

A statistical method that assumes an **underlying mathematical function**, specified by a set of characteristics, or parameters (e.g., mean and standard deviation) for a sample of observations.

persistence

In hydrology, the tendency of high flows to follow high flows, and low flows to follow low flows. Hydrologic time series with persistence are **autocorrelated**.

phreatophytes

Plants with deep root systems that are dependent on water from the water table or adjacent soil moisture reserves.

pluvial

An extended period, typically 5 years or longer, of abnormally wet conditions; the opposite of drought.

principal components regression (PCR)

A statistical technique for analyzing and developing multiple regressions from data with multiple potential explanatory variables.

prior appropriation

"First in time, first in right." The prevailing doctrine of water rights for the western United States; a legal system that determines water rights by the earliest date of diversion or storage for beneficial use.

probability density function (PDF)

A function, or curve, that defines the shape of a probability distribution for a continuous random variable.

projection

A long-term (typically 10-100 years) forecast of future hydroclimatic conditions that is contingent on specified other conditions occurring during the forecast period, typically a particular scenario of greenhouse gas emissions.

quantiles

Divisions of the range of observations of a variable into equal-sized groups.

r

Correlation coefficient. The strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables.

R²

Coefficient of determination. The proportion of variance in a dependent variable that's explained by the independent variables in a regression model.

radiometer

An instrument used to detect and measure the intensity of radiant energy, i.e., shortwave energy emitted from the sun and reflected by clouds, and longwave energy emitted from the earth's surface.

raster

A digital image or computer mapping format consisting of rows of colored pixels.

reanalysis

An analysis of historical climate or hydrologic conditions that assimilates observed data into a modeling environment to produce consistent fields of variables over the entire period of analysis.

reference evapotranspiration

An estimate of the upper bound of evapotranspiration losses from irrigated croplands, and thereby the water need for irrigation.

regression

A statistical technique used for modeling the linear relationship between two or more variables, e.g., snowpack and seasonal streamflow.

relative humidity (RH)

The amount of moisture in the atmosphere relative to the amount that would be present if the air were saturated. RH is expressed in percent, and is a function of both moisture content and air temperature.

remote sensing

The science and techniques for obtaining information from sensors placed on satellites, aircraft, or other platforms distant from the object(s) being sensed.

residual

The difference between the observed value and the estimated value of the quantity of interest.

resolution

The level of detail in model output; the ability to distinguish two points in space (or time) as separate.

spatial resolution - Resolution across space, i.e., the ability to separate small details in a spatial representation such as in an image or model.

temporal resolution - Resolution in time, i.e., hourly, daily, monthly, or annual. Equivalent to time step.

return flow

The water diverted from a river or stream that returns to a water source and is available for consumptive use by others downstream.

runoff

Precipitation that flows toward streams on the surface of the ground or within the ground. Runoff as it is routed and measured within channels is *streamflow*.

runoff efficiency

The fraction of annual precipitation in a basin or other area that becomes runoff, i.e., not lost through evapotranspiration.

sensible heat flux

The flow of heat from the Earth's surface to the atmosphere without phase changes in the water, or the energy directly absorbed/released by an object without a phase change occurring.

shortwave radiation

Incoming solar radiation consisting of visible, near-ultraviolet, and near-infrared spectra. The wavelength spectrum is between 0.2 and 3.0 micrometers.

skew

The degree of asymmetry in a given probability distribution from a Gaussian or normal (i.e., bell-shaped) distribution.

skill

The accuracy of the forecast relative to a baseline "naïve" forecast, such as the climatological average for that day. A forecast that performs better than the baseline forecast is said to have positive skill.

smoothing filter

A mathematical filter designed to enhance the signal-to-noise ratio in a dataset over certain frequencies. Common signal smoothing techniques include moving average and Gaussian algorithms.

snow water equivalent (SWE)

The depth, often expressed in inches, of liquid water contained within the snowpack that would theoretically result if you melted the snowpack instantaneously.

snow course

A linear site used from which manual measurements are taken periodically, to represent snowpack conditions for larger area. Courses are typically about 1,000' long and are situated in areas protected from wind in order to get the most accurate snowpack measurements.

snow pillow

A device (e.g., at SNOTEL sites) that provides a value of the average water equivalent of snow that has accumulated on it; typically the pillow contains antifreeze and has a pressure sensor that measures the weight pressing down on the pillow.

stationarity

The condition in which the statistical properties of the sample data, including their probability distribution and related parameters, are stable over time.

statistically significant

Unlikely to occur by chance alone, as indicated by one of several statistical tests.

stepwise regression

The process of building a regression model from a set of values by entering and removing predictor variables in a step-by-step manner.

stochastic method

A statistical method in which randomness is considered and included in the model used to generate output; the same input may produce different outputs in successive model runs.

stratosphere

The region of the upper atmosphere extending from the top of the troposphere to the base of the mesosphere; it begins about 11–15 km above the surface in the mid-latitudes.

streamflow

Water flow within a river channel, typically expressed in cubic feet per second for flow rate, or in acre-feet for flow volume. Synonymous with **discharge**.

sublimation

When water (i.e., snow and ice) or another substance transitions from the solid phase to the vapor phase without going through the intermediate liquid phase; a major source of snowpack loss over the course of the season.

surface energy balance

The net balance of the exchange of energy between the Earth's surface and the atmosphere.

teleconnection

A physical linkage between a change in atmospheric/oceanic circulation in one region (e.g., ENSO; the tropical Pacific) and a shift in weather or climate in a distant region (e.g., the Colorado River Basin).

temperature inversion

When temperature increases with height in a layer of the atmosphere, as opposed to the typical gradient of temperature decreasing with height.

tercile

Any of the two points that divide an ordered distribution into three parts, each containing a third of the population.

tilt

A shift in probabilities toward a certain outcome.

transpiration

Water discharged into the atmosphere from plant surfaces.

troposphere

The layer of the atmosphere from the Earth's surface up to the tropopause (~11–15 km) below the stratosphere; characterized by decreasing temperature with height, vertical wind motion, water vapor content, and sensible weather (clouds, rain, etc.).

undercatch

When less precipitation is captured by a precipitation gage than actually falls; more likely to occur with snow, especially under windy conditions.

unregulated flow

Observed streamflow adjusted for some, but not all upstream activities, depending on the location and application.

Upper Basin

The parts of the Colorado River Basin in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico that are upstream of the **Colorado River Compact point** at Lee Ferry, Arizona.

validation

The process of comparing a model and its behavior and outputs to the real system, after calibration.

variance

An instance of difference in the data set. In regard to statistics, variance is the square of the standard deviation of a variable from its mean in the data set.

wavelet analysis

A method for determining the dominant frequencies constituting the overall time-varying signal in a dataset.

Acronyms & Abbreviations

24MS

24-Month Study Model

AET

actual evapotranspiration

AgriMET

Cooperative Agricultural Weather Network

AgWxNet

Agricultural Weather Network

AHPS

Advanced Hydrologic Prediction Service

ALEXI

Atmosphere-Land Exchange Inversion

AMJ

April-May-June

AMO

Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation

ANN

artificial neural network

AOP

Annual Operating Plan

AR

atmospheric river

AR-1

first-order autoregression

ARkStorm

Atmospheric River 1,000-year Storm

ASCE

American Society of Civil Engineers

ASO

Airborne Snow Observatory

ASOS

Automated Surface Observing System

AVHRR

Advanced Very High-Resolution
Radiometer

AWOS

Automated Weather Observing System

BCCA

Bias-Corrected Constructed Analog

BCSD

Bias-Corrected Spatial Disaggregation
(downscaling method)

BCSD5

BCSD applied to CMIP5

BOR

United States Bureau of Reclamation

BREB

Bowen Ratio Energy Balance method

C3S

Copernicus Climate Change Service

CA

Constructed Analogues

CADSWES

Center for Advanced Decision Support for
Water and Environmental Systems

CADWR

California Department of Water Resources

CanCM4i

Canadian Coupled Model, 4th generation
(global climate model)

CBRFC

Colorado Basin River Forecast Center

CCA

Canonical Correlation Analysis

CCSM4

Community Climate System Model, version 4 (global climate model)

CDEC

California Data Exchange Center

CDF

cumulative distribution function

CESM

Community Earth System Model (global climate model)

CFS

Climate/Coupled Forecast System

CFSv2

Coupled Forecast System version 2 (NOAA climate forecast model)

CHPS

Community Hydrologic Prediction System

CIMIS

California Irrigation Management Information System

CIR

crop irrigation requirement

CIRES

Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences

CLIMAS

Climate Assessment for the Southwest

CLM

Community Land Model

CM2.1

Coupled Physical Model, version 2.1 (global climate model)

CMIP

Coupled Model Intercomparison Project (coordinated archive of global climate model output)

CNRFC

California-Nevada River Forecast Center

CoAgMET

Colorado Agricultural Meteorological Network

CoCoRaHS

Community Collaborative Rain, Hail and Snow Network

CODOS

Colorado Dust-on-Snow

CONUS

contiguous United States (the lower 48 states)

COOP

Cooperative Observer Program

CP

Central Pacific

CPC

Climate Prediction Center

CRB

Colorado River Basin

CRBPP

Colorado River Basin Pilot Project

CRPSS

Continuous Ranked Probability Skill Score

CRSM

Colorado River Simulation Model

CRSP

Colorado River Storage Project

CRSS Colorado River Simulation System	DHSVM Distributed Hydrology Soil Vegetation Model
CRWAS Colorado River Water Availability Study	DJF December-January-February
CSAS	
CRWAS Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies	DMDU Decision Making Under Deep Uncertainty
CTSM Community Terrestrial Systems Model	DMI Data Management Interface
CU consumptive use	DOD Department of Defense
CUL consumptive uses and losses	DOE Department of Energy
CV coefficient of variation	DOW Doppler [radar] on Wheels
CVP/SWP Central Valley Project/State Water Project	DRI Desert Research Institute
CWCB Colorado Water Conservation Board	DTR diurnal temperature range
CWEST Center for Water, Earth Science and Technology	EC eddy-covariance method
DA data assimilation	EC Environment Canada
Daymet v.3 daily gridded surface meteorological data	ECCA ensemble canonical correlation analysis
DCP Drought Contingency Plan	ECMWF European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts
DEM digital elevation model	EDDI Evaporative Demand Drought Index
DEOS Delaware Environmental Observing System	EFAS European Flood Awareness System

EIS
Environmental Impact Statement

En-GARD
Ensemble Generalized Analog Regression
Downscaling

ENSO
El Niño-Southern Oscillation

EOF
empirical orthogonal function

EP
Eastern Pacific

ERC
energy release component

ESI
Evaporative Stress Index

ESM
coupled Earth system model

ESP
ensemble streamflow prediction

ESRL
Earth System Research Laboratory

ET
evapotranspiration

ET₀
Reference (crop) evapotranspiration

EVI
Enhanced Vegetation Index

FAA
Federal Aviation Administration

FAWN
Florida Automated Weather Network

FEWS
Famine Early Warning System

FEWS
Flood Early Warning System

FIRO
forecast-informed reservoir operations

FLOR
Forecast-oriented Low Ocean Resolution
(global climate model)

FORTTRAN
Formula Translation programming
language

FPS
Federal Priority Streamgages

FROMUS
Forecast and Reservoir Operation Modeling
Uncertainty Scoping

fSCA
fractional snow covered area

FWS
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

GCM
global climate model, or general circulation
model

GEFS
Global Ensemble Forecast System

GEM
Global Environmental Multiscale model

GEOS
Goddard Earth Observing System (global
climate model)

GeoTiff
Georeferenced Tagged Image File Format

GFDL
Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory

GFS Global Forecast System model	HDA hydrologic data assimilation
GHCN Global Historical Climatology Network	HDSC Hydrometeorological Design Studies Center
GHCN-D Global Historical Climate Network-Daily	HEFS Hydrologic Ensemble Forecast Service
GHG greenhouse gas	HESP Hierarchical Ensemble Streamflow Prediction
GIS geographic information system	HL-RDHM Hydrologic Laboratory-Research Distributed Hydrologic Model
GLOFAS Global Flood Awareness System	HMT Hydromet Testbed
GLOFFIS Global Flood Forecast Information System	HP hydrological processor
GOES Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite	HRRR High Resolution Rapid Refresh (weather model)
GRACE Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment	HSS Heidke Skill Score
GRIB gridded binary or general regularly-distributed information in binary form	HTESSEL Land-surface Hydrology Tiled ECMWF Scheme for Surface Exchanges over Land
gridMET Gridded Surface Meteorological dataset	HUC Hydrologic Unit Code
GSSHA Gridded Surface/Subsurface Hydrologic Analysis	HUC4 A 4-digit Hydrologic Unit Code, referring to large sub-basins (e.g., Gunnison River)
GW groundwater	HUC12 A 12-digit Hydrologic Unit Code, referring to small watersheds
HCCD Historical Canadian Climate Data	
HCN Historical Climatology Network	

ICAR

Intermediate Complexity Atmospheric Research model

ICS

intentionally created surplus

IDW

inverse distance weighting

IFS

integrated forecast system

IHC

initial hydrologic conditions

INSTAAR

Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research

IPCC

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

IPO

Interdecadal Pacific Oscillation

IRI

International Research Institute

iRON

Interactive Roaring Fork Observing Network

ISM

Index Sequential Method

JFM

January-February-March

JJA

June-July-August

K-NN

K-Nearest Neighbor

Landsat

Land Remote-Sensing Satellite (System)

LAST

Lane's Applied Stochastic Techniques

LERI

Landscape Evaporative Response Index

lidar

light detection and ranging

LOCA

Localized Constructed Analog

LSM

land surface model

M&I

municipal and industrial (water use category)

MACA

Multivariate Adaptive Constructed Analog

maf

million acre-feet

MAM

March-April-May

MEFP

Meteorological Ensemble Forecast Processor

METRIC

Mapping Evapotranspiration at high Resolution with Internalized Calibration

MJO

Madden-Julian Oscillation

MMEFS

Met-Model Ensemble Forecast System

MOCOM

Multi-Objective Complex evolution

MODDRFS

MODIS Dust Radiative Forcing in Snow

MODIS

Moderate Resolution Imaging
Spectroradiometer

MODIS LST (MYD11A2)

Moderate Resolution Imaging
Spectroradiometer Land Surface
Temperature (MYD11A2)

MODSCAG

MODIS Snow Covered Area and Grain-size

MPR

Multiscale Parameter Regionalization

MRM

Multiple Run Management

MT-CLIM (or MTCLIM)

Mountain Climate simulator

MTOM

Mid-Term Probabilistic Operations Model

NA-CORDEX

North American Coordinated Regional
Downscaling Experiment

NAM

North American Monsoon

NAO

North Atlantic Oscillation

NARCCAP

North American Regional Climate Change
Assessment Program

NARR

North American Regional Reanalysis

NASA

National Aeronautics and Space
Administration

NASA JPL

NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory

NCAR

National Center for Atmospheric Research

NCCASC

North Central Climate Adaptation Science
Center

NCECONET

North Carolina Environment and Climate
Observing Network

NCEI

National Centers for Environmental
Information

NCEP

National Centers for Environmental
Prediction

nClimDiv

new Climate Divisional (NOAA climate
dataset)

NDBC

National Data Buoy Center

NDVI

Normalized Difference Vegetation Index

NDWI

Normalized Difference Water Index

NEMO

Nucleus for European Modelling of the
Ocean (global ocean model)

NevCan

Nevada Climate-ecohydrological
Assessment Network

NGWOS

Next-Generation Water Observing System

NHMM

Bayesian Nonhomogenous Hidden Markov
Model

NICENET

Nevada Integrated Climate and
Evapotranspiration Network

NIDIS

National Integrated Drought Information
System

NLDAS

North American Land Data Assimilation
System

NMME

North American Multi-Model Ensemble

NN R1

NCEP/NCAR Reanalysis

NOAA

National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration

NOAH

Neural Optimization Applied Hydrology

Noah-MP

Noah-Multi-parameterization Model

NOHRSC

National Operational Hydrologic Remote
Sensing Center

NPP

Nonparametric paleohydrologic method

NRCS

Natural Resource Conservation Service

NSF

National Science Foundation

NSIDC

National Snow and Ice Data Center

NSMN

National Soil Moisture Network

NVDWR

Nevada Department of Water Resources

NWCC

National Water and Climate Center

NWIS

National Water Information System

NWM

National Water Model

NWP

numerical weather prediction

NWS

National Weather Service

NWSRFS

National Weather Service River Forecast
System

NZI

New Zealand Index

OCN

Optimal Climate Normals

OHD

Office of Hydrologic Development

OK Mesonet

Oklahoma Mesoscale Network

ONI

Oceanic Niño Index

OWAQ

Office of Weather and Air Quality

OWP

Office of Water Prediction

PC

principal components

PCA

principal components analysis

PCR
principal components regression

PDO
Pacific Decadal Oscillation

PDSI
Palmer Drought Severity Index

PET
potential evapotranspiration

PGW
pseudo-global warming

PRISM
Parameter-elevation Relationships on
Independent Slopes Model

PSD
Physical Sciences Division

QBO
Quasi-Biennial Oscillation

QDO
Quasi-Decadal Oscillation

QM
quantile mapping

QPE
Quantitative Precipitation Estimate

QPF
Quantitative Precipitation Forecast

QTE
Quantitative Temperature Estimate

QTF
Quantitative Temperature Forecast

radar
radio detection and ranging

RAP
Rapid Refresh (weather model)

RAWS
Remote Automated Weather Station
Network

RCM
Regional Climate Model

RCP
Representative Concentration Pathway

RE
reduction-of-error

RFC
River Forecast Center

RFS
River Forecasting System

RH
relative humidity

RiverSMART
RiverWare Study Manager and Research
Tool

RMSE
root mean squared error

S/I
seasonal to interannual

S2S
subseasonal to seasonal

Sac-SMA
Sacramento Soil Moisture Accounting
Model

SAMS
Stochastic Analysis Modeling and
Simulation

SCA
snow-covered area

SCAN Soil Climate Analysis Network	SON September-October-November
SCE Shuffled Complex Evolution	SPoRT Short-term Prediction Research Transition
SCF seasonal climate forecast	SRES Special Report on Emissions Scenarios
SE standard error	SRP Salt River Project
SECURE Science and Engineering to Comprehensively Understand and Responsibly Enhance Water	SSEBOP Simplified Surface Energy Balance
SFWMD South Florida Water Management District	SSEBOP ET Simplified Surface Energy Balance Evapotranspiration
SM soil moisture	SSP Societally Significant Pathway
SMA Soil Moisture Accounting	SST sea surface temperatures
SMAP Soil Moisture Active Passive	SSW stratospheric sudden warming
SMHI Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute	SubX Subseasonal Experiment
SMLR Screening Multiple Linear Regression	SUMMA Structure for Unifying Multiple Modeling Alternatives
SMOS Soil Moisture and Ocean Salinity	SVD singular value decomposition
SNODAS Snow Data Assimilation System	SW surface water
SNOTEL Snow Telemetry	SWANN Snow-Water Artificial Neural Network Modeling System
SOI Southern Oscillation Index	SWcasts Southwest Forecasts

SWE

snow water equivalent

SWOT

Surface Water and Ocean Topography

SWS

Statistical Water Supply

Tair

air temperature

Tdew

dew point temperature

TopoWx

Topography Weather (climate dataset)

TVA

Tennessee Valley Authority

UC

Upper Colorado Region (Reclamation)

UCAR

University Corporation for Atmospheric Research

UCBOR

Upper Colorado Bureau of Reclamation

UCRB

Upper Colorado River Basin

UCRC

Upper Colorado River Commission

UCRSFIG

Upper Colorado Region State-Federal Interagency Group

USACE

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

USBR

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

USCRN

U.S. Climate Reference Network

USDA

U.S. Department of Agriculture

USGCRP

U.S. Global Change Research Program

USGS

U.S. Geological Survey

USHCN

United States Historical Climatology Network

VIC

Variable Infiltration Capacity (model)

VIIRS

Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite

VPD

vapor pressure deficit

WBAN

Weather Bureau Army Navy

WCRP

World Climate Research Program

WFO

Weather Forecast Office

WPC

Weather Prediction Center

WRCC

Western Regional Climate Center

WRF

Weather Research and Forecasting

WRF-Hydro

WRF coupled with additional models to represent hydrologic processes

WSF

water supply forecast

WSWC

Western States Water Council

WUCA

Water Utility Climate Alliance

WWA

Western Water Assessment

WWCRA

West-Wide Climate Risk Assessments

WWMPP

Wyoming Weather Modification Pilot
Project

